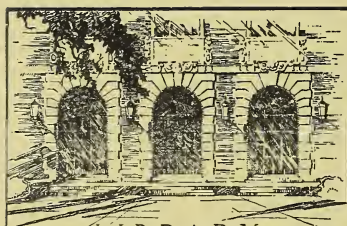


FREMONT'S EXPLORATIONS, 1838-1853



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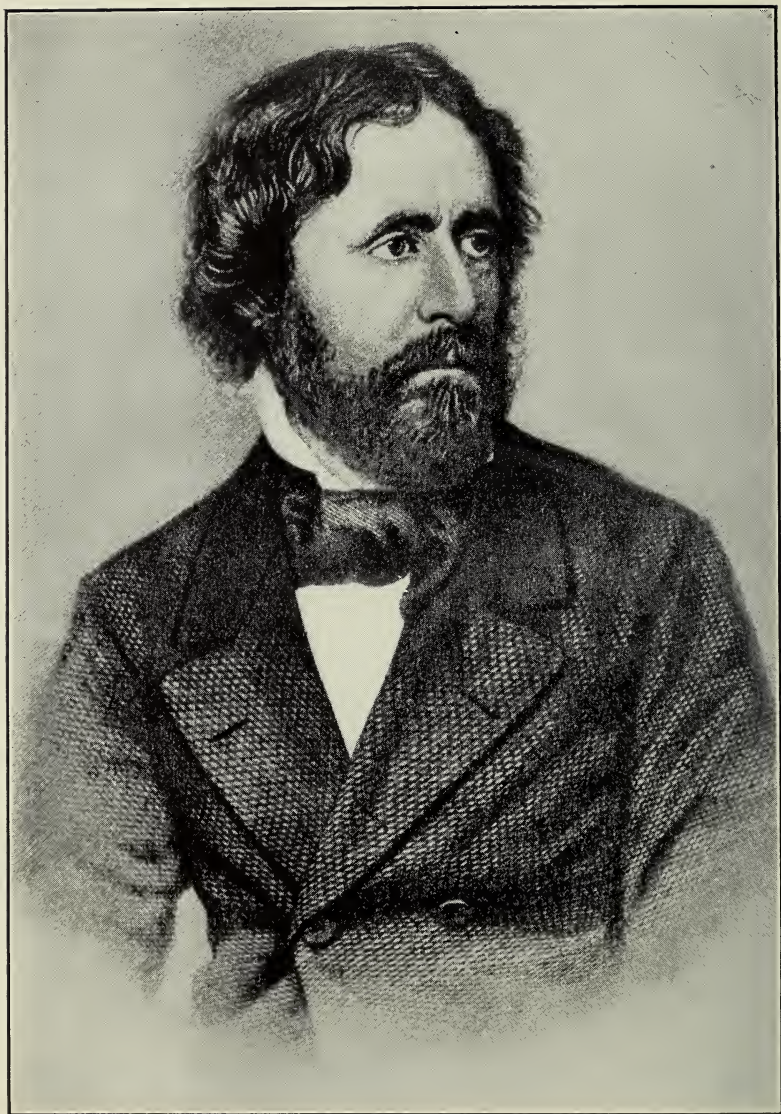
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FREMONT
Pathmarker of the West



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JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT, THE FIRST UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM CALIFORNIA, 1850

A M E R I C A N C L A S S I C S

FREMONT

Pathmarker of the West

By

ALLAN NEVINS

Volume I

FREMONT, THE EXPLORER

FREDERICK UNGAR PUBLISHING CO.
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ROBERT G. CLELAND

MAX FARRAND

EDWIN F. GAY

WILLIAM B. MUNRO

AND THE STAFF OF THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY

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P R E F A C E

IN 1926, as a young member of the editorial staff of the *New York World*, I met Major Frank P. Frémont, who possessed a useful collection of his parents' papers, though the larger part of them had been destroyed in a warehouse fire. With the encouragement of two friends expert in Western history, W. J. Ghent and Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, I embraced the opportunity to use these papers for a long overdue biography (none having appeared since 1856) of John Charles Frémont.

This work, published in two volumes in 1928 under the title, *Frémont, The West's Greatest Adventurer*, emphasized the romantic aspects of Frémont's career. Though no less a person than Willa Cather wrote me that the color and drama of the story had delighted her, it probably overemphasized the romance; and eleven years later I entirely rewrote it with the title, *Frémont: Pathmarker of the West*. Though this appeared in one volume, the original book was substantially enlarged, for I had accumulated much fresh material. Then in 1955 I reissued this work with corrections, a number of textual alterations, and a forty-page chapter of additional information which I called "Some New Light on Frémont." It is this edition of 1955 which is here republished. Had the conditions of publication permitted, I would have incorporated the "New Light" into the main text in chronological order. As it is, I trust readers will not neglect this final chapter.

The picturesqueness of Frémont's history should not obscure the fact that it abounds in difficulties. To tell even a plain story of his travels is not easy. A companion volume, which I have edited as *Frémont's Narratives of Exploration and Adventure*, tells part of the tale, but much more has to be supplied. The biographer has to do justice to Frémont's exploration of the

Great Basin without injustice to Jedediah Smith, who crossed it north and south, east and west; he has to avoid getting lost in that tangled mountainous area of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico in which Frémont and his guide, on his last expedition, did get lost; he has to make it plain that the same stream could be successively Mary's River, Ogden's River, and the Humboldt River; he has to find what Frémont meant by Tulare Lake Fork when the lake does not fork; he has to know that the Moapa and Digger Indians were the same; and he has to learn that Frémont's "opal" arrowheads were probably obsidian.

Beyond all this lie the great controversies: that over the Gillespie message and Frémont's course in California in 1846; that over the Kearny quarrel; that over the Missouri campaign of 1861, which I have since treated with somewhat different emphasis and fuller detail in my *War for the Union: the Improvised War, 1861-1862*; and that over Frémont's withdrawal from the presidential race in 1864. In these controversies I have made an effort to state the facts with accuracy and impartiality.

The impetuous Frémont was often his own worst enemy. He tried, moreover, to shine in too many fields, and by undertaking tasks for which he was ill equipped courted not only failure, but a charge of false pretensions. He should have kept mainly in the field of geography and exploration, where his achievements, declares the historian of our government explorations in the west, "added a cubit to the national stature." But his reputation suffered also from circumstances not his own fault. He was caught in 1846 in a cruel dilemma: whether he took his well-armed force back home to the east, or kept it in California as war clouds lowered, he was sure to be harshly censured. In the Civil War he suffered heavily from the enmity of West Pointers. They were jealous of all nonprofessional generals; they had disliked him ever since the Kearny quarrel and his rapid rise to fame; and two West Point subordinates, Sturgis and Pope, were actually more anxious to see Frémont fail than

to hasten the defeat of the Confederacy. As William Tecumseh Sherman said, those commanders were lucky who did not, like McDowell, McClellan, Buell, and Frémont, get high posts too soon. But all in all, what a fascinating career Frémont's was!

Some mention of the author's debts for assistance will be found in the final Bibliographical Note.

ALLAN NEVINS

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as a representative of the Moderates; The lunatic fringe of Republicanism; Frémont in 1861; Building General Frémont's bridge across the Osage; Brilliant charge of General Frémont's bodyguard through the town of Springfield, Missouri, on October 24, 1861; Frémont's army on the march through southwestern Missouri; The F. P. Blair family in politics; Bust of Frémont from the original by Austin James.

II

Charleston Boyhood

ABOUT John Charles Frémont's cradle hung as dark clouds as have surrounded the infancy of any notable American—the clouds of illegitimacy, poverty, and total uncertainty of the future. In his veins ran the blood of a strange and far from auspicious union; the union of an impulsive, warm-hearted, and wilful Virginia girl, and of a roving, adventurous, erratic French émigré. His earliest years were spent in wanderings from state to state, town to town, with his parents; from Georgia to Tennessee, from Virginia to South Carolina.

All this was a fitting overture to one of the stormiest, the most erratic, and the most adventurous of American careers. There are two great elements of interest in Frémont's biography. One lies simply in the unfailing drama of his life; a life romantically wrought out of the fiercest tempests and most radiant bursts of sunshine. From birth to death fortune gave him one sustained adventure. His fate carried him along our wildest frontiers, into the clash of national ambitions in the Far West, up to the higher reaches of party politics, through the thick of the Civil War, and into the thorniest jungles of post-bellum finance. It was no mean destiny. To explore more of the West than any other single man, to be a leading figure in the conquest of California, to be the first candidate of a great party for the Presidency, to pen a book that helped in molding now-populous communities, to rise from poverty to millions and sink to poverty again, to leave a name written across the geography of one-third of the continent—this constitutes an absorbing story. It tells us much of the United

States as well as of Frémont. The conditions which made so flamboyant a career possible were as remarkable as the man, and are well worth pondering. And merely as a spectacle, we can rejoice in the scope and color of the story; for be assured, no spectacle of *that* kind will Americans ever see again. Whether we dislike or like the man, whether we applaud or condemn his acts (and it has been as difficult to remain neutral about him as about Mary Queen of Scots or Alexander Hamilton or Andrew Jackson), his life will always touch our imagination.

The other interest in Frémont's career is provided by its element of psychological mystery. How could the man who sometimes succeeded so dazzlingly at other times fail so abysmally? How can we account for his dizzy alternations of triumph and disaster? Sometimes he snatched victory from the direst perils; sometimes Fortune came bearing her amplest gifts on a golden platter, and as he touched them they turned to apples of Sodom. How can we explain the love of Kit Carson and the hatred of Stephen W. Kearny? How explain that Horace Greeley thought him fitter than Lincoln to be President in 1864, while others thought him unfit to be governor of Arizona Territory? Part of this psychological problem is undoubtedly to be solved by reference to his ancestry: to his inheritance of impulsiveness as well as brilliancy from emotional and ill-balanced parents. Part of the explanation is to be sought in his early training. His upbringing was singularly adapted to heighten the venturesome, heedless, self-reliant traits which the precocious boy inherited, and singularly wanting in the discipline which his ardent spirit and quick mind most needed.

On his parentage, as we have said, falls a dark shadow. Our history begins with an intrigue and elopement which in 1811 produced a furor of excitement in Richmond, Virginia. The Virginia capital was at this time, on the eve of the War of 1812, a vigorous, attractive town of six or seven thousand people, one-third of them Negroes, another third artisans,

shop-keepers, and truck-gardeners, and the remainder people of means living in handsome brick houses on the well-shaded hills overlooking the James. It was a commercial and industrial center of importance, exporting tobacco, milling flour, and importing goods for distribution through the Upper South. On Shockoe Hill stood the homes of Chief Justice Marshall, Bishop Moore, Colonel Edward Carrington, Thomas Ritchie the editor of the *Enquirer*, and Judge Philip N. Nicholas; on Gamble Hill stood the homes of William Wirt, later Attorney-General, and William H. Cabell. Such great figures as Jefferson and Madison sometimes appeared; while Monroe was now governor. The embargo and Napoleonic Wars had diminished Richmond's prosperity. But it was still an aristocratic town, a Federalist stronghold, with much wealth and conservatism; the life of its patrician society was enlivened by balls, theatrical performances, receptions, and hunt-meetings. Legislative sessions brought land-speculators and canal-promoters flocking in, and were marked by angry battles of sections and parties—Feds, Republicans, and Quids. Though the time and town were strait-laced, Virginia blood ran hotly enough to furnish passionate courtships, deadly rivalries, intrigues, and duels; and from an illicit and tempestuous love affair sprang John C. Frémont.

Between Byrd and Arch Streets, overlooking the falls of the James, lived old Major John Pryor and his young wife. Mrs. Pryor, according to records of the time, was a spirited and beautiful young woman, the picture of animation and energy. Her family was well known in Tidewater Virginia. She had been Anne Beverley Whiting, youngest daughter among the twelve children of Colonel Thomas Whiting, a large landowner of Gloucester County, and at one time a leading member of the House of Burgesses.¹ He had died in Anne's early childhood, and her mother had married a man named Carey, who soon ran through most of the widow's estate. Anne

¹ *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XXII, p. 131; XXXIII, p. 203.

had been brought up by a married sister, and apparently knew the bitterness of the bread of charity. In 1796, when she was seventeen, her charms attracted the Revolutionary veteran John Pryor. Evidently her sister was anxious to be rid of her, while other relatives brought pressure to bear; and to escape her poverty she married a man certainly old enough to be her father.² It could hardly have been a marriage of love, for her husband was past middle life, gouty, and—according to family tradition—of decaying physical powers. It is significant that they had no children.

Yet John Pryor was a man of character and force, who had made himself well known throughout the state. He had fought under Washington, had been a very energetic Commissary-General of Military Stores for Virginia in the last critical years of the Revolution, and had become vice-president of the Virginia Society of the Cincinnati when that post held a certain distinction.³ Every Virginian knew his livery-stable, the largest in the capital, where travelers could have their horses "elegantly nicked for a guinea each," with "cropping and foxing in the latest styles," and "all manner of farriery."⁴ Horse-racing was one of the most passionately followed of southern sports. Pryor had been a leader in organizing it—a secretary of the Jockey Club, a familiar figure at races, and a shrewd judge of horse-flesh. He had also the reputation of a town wit. To augment his income, he owned the principal recreation park of the town, some two acres bounded by Arch, Byrd, Seventh, and Eighth Streets, called the Haymarket Garden; an attractive green spot where citizens could escape the dust, indulge in ices, punch, and cake, and sometimes listen to music while watching the rapids of the James. Mrs. Pryor doubtless helped to supervise it. The Major's house was a modest structure built in a common Southern style, with living quarters in the center, and two long

² *Journal*, House of Delegates, 1811-12, p. 29.

³ For various state services performed by Pryor see *Virginia Calendar of State Papers*, II, III, *passim*; V, p. 128; VII, p. 503; VIII, p. 320ff.; IX, p. 88ff.

⁴ Mary N. Stanard, *Richmond, Its People and Its Story*, p. 55.

narrow wings which connected it with kitchen and pantry at one extremity, and with servants' quarters at the other.⁵ The Pryors held a respected place in the middle stratum of Richmond society.

Unfortunately for the Major, about 1810 his wife, doubtless long since rather tired of her fast-ageing husband, became acquainted with a handsome French émigré named Charles Frémon, lately arrived in the capital. We are told that he was a dark, slender man, with fine features and much distinction of manner. His life had been packed with adventure. Born in a village near Lyons, he had identified himself with the Royalists during the French Revolution and had been compelled to take passage on a French ship to Santo Domingo. Here he hoped to find refuge with an aunt. On the Atlantic his vessel was captured by an English cruiser and taken into one of the British West Indies, where Frémon and other prisoners were interned. A protracted captivity followed. But being allowed the freedom of the island, he supplemented his prisoner's allowance by making basketware, doing cabinet work and upholstery, and painting frescoes upon the ceilings of the better houses. Evidently he had some artistic capacity, and a manual dexterity which his son later inherited. In time he was released, and arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, penniless and friendless, but undaunted. French refugees were then numerous in the United States, and the Francophile Republicans of the southern and middle states held them in high favor. Frémon was promptly taken into the best circles in Tidewater Virginia. He gave lessons in French, and perhaps continued his frescoing. Finding Virginia agreeable and seeing Europe scourged by war, he gradually surrendered his original design of returning to France. William and Mary College employed him for a time, but he left it to join the staff of a Richmond school kept by the well-known scholar, Jefferson's friend, Louis Girardin.⁶

⁵ Richmond *Dispatch*, July 8, 1856.

⁶ John Bigelow, *Life and Public Services of John Charles Frémont*, p. 12. Family tradition holds that the name was always Frémont. But the patronymic

In 1809, Frémon was teaching in Girardin's academy, one of the best-known in the South, as chief assistant to Girardin and his partner, David Doyle. It speaks well for him that he was employed by so reputable an establishment. But he was of irregular habits and wilful, impulsive nature. He was soon known to be living in a house "on the Hill" with a woman not his wife, and when he defied his superiors, Doyle had him summarily dismissed.⁷ However, he remained popular in the town. When John Wood soon afterward became Girardin's partner, he was reëmployed, Wood remarking that "Richmond people do not care much about these things." No doubt he was still received in the best houses. After the break-up of his old ménage he went to live in a cottage of Major Pryor's at the Haymarket; he began, according to one story, to teach Mrs. Pryor French, and their friendship quickly ripened into intimacy.

Mrs. Pryor, now past thirty, saw her youth slipping away; her husband was growing old, but he was sufficiently vigorous later to take an active part in the War of 1812, and he might live long. The attachment between her and the ardent young Frémon was watched with sympathetic interest by several friends. Mrs. Pryor had with her a niece, Kitty Cowne, who disliked the rather vulgar, horsey old livery-stable keeper, and encouraged the love affair. Frémon had a fellow-refugee named John Lataste, who had lived with him at the Haymarket for a time, and whom he made a confidant. He often discussed his intrigue with Mrs. Pryor with Lataste, and told him they had agreed to wait for Pryor's death and then be married.⁸ But their conduct was so indiscreet that it soon aroused Pryor's suspicions.

Early in July, 1811, the inevitable explosion occurred. In the presence of Frémon and Kitty Cowne, the enraged husband

Frémon is not uncommon in France; and his friend Lataste spells the name Frémon in a sworn deposition, as Girardin does in repeated newspaper advertisements. For his service with William and Mary College, see R. B. Osborne, "The Professional Biography of Moncure Robinson," *William and Mary College Quarterly*, Second Series, Vol. I (1921), pp. 237-260.

⁷ Letter by Doyle in *Virginia Patriot*, August 23, 1811.

⁸ MS deposition by Lataste, December 3, 1811, Virginia State Library.

taxed Mrs. Pryor with flagrant misconduct and even threatened to erase the blot on his honor by killing her. She drew herself up, blazing with anger, and told him: "You may spare yourself the crime. I shall leave your house to-morrow morning forever!"⁹ Frémon was with difficulty restrained from assaulting the Major. He told Lataste that he would kill Pryor or anybody else who tried to interfere with their immediate elopement, or to maltreat Mrs. Pryor on his account. On the morning of July 10th the pair left Richmond in the stage for Williamsburg, Mrs. Pryor taking her personal belongings and two slaves. Kitty Cowne's father came to remove her from the Haymarket; the Major was left alone, while Richmond rang with the scandal. It almost disrupted the school of poor Girardin, who had to make profuse explanations that he had been unaware of Frémon's misconduct.

The intrigue and elopement constituted an offense far too grave for the Virginia society of those days to forget or forgive. Mrs. Pryor and Frémon had no wish to tarry in Williamsburg or Norfolk longer than was necessary to gather together what property she possessed there. At the earliest possible moment they set out southward. A family tradition, given to John Bigelow almost fifty years later, stated that their joint capital was sufficient to gratify Frémon's wish to tour the South and learn something of the habits of the Indians, in which he felt a keen interest; that they took their own horses, carriage, and servants, and began a quasi-scientific tour. This may be true, for Mrs. Pryor had inherited just a year previously from her father's estate, long involved in litigation, slaves valued at \$2,400, and possibly other means;¹⁰ while Frémon was an improvident man. But the story seems a dubious bit of gilding. It is probable that Frémon moved from town to town finding work as teacher of French, fresco-painter, upholsterer, or dancing-master, and it is certain that their means were soon straitened.

⁹ Statement by Mrs. Mary Mead Burrill, John Bigelow MSS.

¹⁰ MS Records, Richmond Superior Court of Chancery, June 13, 1810.

Family tradition, as recorded by Bigelow, also asserts that the Virginia legislature promptly passed an act divorcing Major Pryor and his wife—for the legislature alone could grant divorces—and that the two soon remarried, the Major with his housekeeper, and Mrs. Pryor with Frémon. But this tradition is plainly inaccurate. When Major Pryor made petition for a divorce, the legislature refused it December 11, 1811. No reasons appear on the record, but the refusal makes it seem probable that the Major also had been guilty of misconduct, or had grossly maltreated his wife. A search of subsequent legislative proceedings fails to reveal any record of favorable action. Certainly no divorce had been granted when on January 21, 1813, the boy John Charles Frémon (t) was born in Savannah, whither Frémon and Mrs. Pryor had traveled by way of Charleston. He was of illegitimate birth—as illegitimate as Erasmus, or Alexander Hamilton, or many another man whose parents had united in a permanent union without benefit of clergy.

If Mrs. Pryor actually had \$2,400 when they left Williamsburg in midsummer of 1811, most of that sum had been dissipated before they reached Savannah in early October. For Frémon immediately began advertising in the *Columbian Museum* of Savannah for pupils in French, while Mrs. Pryor was eager for boarders at the house they occupied “in the rear of the residence of Charles Howard,” then one of Savannah’s most prominent citizens. Evidently few cared for private French lessons; for several weeks later Frémon is found as teacher and dancing-master in the service of J. B. LeRoy, who announced the reopening of his Savannah academy with the émigré as his assistant. For the next two years, as advertisements in the city papers show, the pair depended upon his teaching and her labors as boarding-house mistress. After a time they took up their home in a two-story-and-basement building of warm red brick in what was then the Yamacraw section (now 563-565 West Bay Street); a house that, with heavy basement pillars, a door and four front windows on the first floor, and five large windows

on the second, still stands. It was the property of the Gibbons family, to whom the land had been granted by George II in 1760. To-day Yamacraw has deteriorated and is largely given over to Negroes; but at this time it was the home of families of good social position, and Frémont was in convenient access to those who could afford lessons in French and dancing. In this Gibbons house John C. Frémont first saw the light. In fancy we can picture the baby boy in the arms of a Negro nurse, sunning on West Bay or the neighboring West Broad—wide, sandy, sleepy streets, lined with comfortable residences and large gardens, where life passed drowsily.¹¹

In 1813 the family again took up its travels. Perhaps Savannah failed to offer sufficient pupils; perhaps the parents merely wished to take their baby away from the summer heat of Georgia. At any rate, another family tradition declares that this summer the orbit of the infant Frémont impinged momentarily upon that of a statesman with whose later career his own was to be so closely bound, Thomas Hart Benton. The Frémonts (the "t" was not yet added) were staying at the huge rambling City Hotel at Nashville, Tennessee, when on September 4, 1813, they witnessed a memorable episode. Among other guests were Benton, then a fiery young frontier colonel, lawyer, and legislator of Tennessee, and his brother Jesse. Suddenly there arrived at the Nashville Inn just across the square no less a personage than General Andrew Jackson, with the laurels of his march from Natchez to Nashville to meet the Creeks still upon him, the laurels of New Orleans still to be won; making the building ring with his commands, and receiving the cheers of the townsfolk. A feud had been smoldering between Jackson and the two Bentons. It had originated in a trifle: Jackson had served as second to an opponent of Jesse Benton's in a duel, and when Thomas Hart had heard of this he had angrily assailed Jackson for conducting the affair in a "savage" and "base" manner. The Indian-fighter had then sworn to horse-

¹¹ Contemporaneous Savannah newspapers; see also article by Thomas Gamble, *Savannah Press*, March 20, 1928.

whip Benton on sight. The quarrel was an opera bouffe episode, all the more ironically ludicrous because in later years Benton became one of Jackson's staunchest supporters. But an encounter now occurred at the City Hotel which might have been tragic. Blows and shots were exchanged; Jackson was carried away with his left shoulder shattered by a ball from Jesse Benton's pistol, so that he soaked two mattresses with blood and for a time seemed near death; Thomas Hart Benton pitched headlong down a flight of stairs, and other combatants—for the mêlée became extensive—were slightly injured.¹² The parents of little John Charles heard the uproar, and it is said that a bullet passed through their room. In the turbulent South of that day they were doubtless used to such affrays.

The Frémons tarried in Nashville until a second child, a daughter, was born. Soon thereafter they removed to Norfolk, Virginia. Apparently by this time Pryor was dead, they could and doubtless did legally marry, and the scandal was laid to rest. Mrs. Frémon had relatives near-by, and her husband had a brother named Francis. We know nothing of their life during the next few years. Another son was born, of whom we shall hear but little. Then, in or about 1818, the émigré himself passed away.¹³ He had lived but seven years after his union with Mrs. Pryor, and given her little but poverty and hardship. Francis Frémon was on the point of returning to his native land with his family, and proposed that Mrs. Pryor accompany him. But she would hear nothing of such an exile, for she was resolved to remain an American. She lived for a time at Dinwiddie Courthouse, where young John Charles—called "Charley"—received his first instruction. Then, with an income too pinched to make life among her old neighbors comfortable, she removed to Charleston. Here after the passage of a few years the daughter died, leaving only the two sons.

Our first real glimpse of John Charles Frémont is thus caught

¹² Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson*, pp. 152-154; Theodore Roosevelt, *Thomas Hart Benton*, p. 28; John Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 22.

¹³ Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 23.

when he was a school-boy in the old city on the banks of the Ashley and Cooper; a city which, though counting fewer than twenty thousand people, boasted no little wealth, culture, and social gaiety. It was an ideal place for a lad of Frémont's lively, adventurous temperament. The French Huguenots made him feel his paternal blood an advantage, not a liability. The placid, genial life offered much to enjoy. Stately residences stretched away from the outskirts of the town—Drayton Hall, Middleton Place, Greenfield, Hampton, the Elms, and others; a bustling trade in cotton, rice, indigo, and other staples, largely in the hands of foreigners, kept the business district active. Every May the more affluent planters of the lowlands, fleeing the pestilential heat of their inland estates, came to town to enjoy its sea-breezes. They returned home when the first frosts fell in November, killing the malaria, but many of them were back in town shortly after Christmas—by the end of January. This was the "gay season" beloved by young people. It included the concerts and ball of the St. Cecilia Society, the dancing assemblies, the Philharmonic concerts, the Jockey Ball, and the races. Race week was a carnival period; planters then thronged to town, the traders stopped their business, and all the men talked horses and laid bets over their juleps. Negroes abounded, for it was a poor planter or merchant who did not keep a half dozen servants in attendance upon his stables, table, and household; their merry chatter filled the streets, and their songs echoed from the wharves, covered with imported luxuries and West Indian products—barrels of molasses, bags of coffee, cocoanuts, and bananas—as well as Carolina staples. Those who wished to drink and gamble had ample opportunity; but accredited persons who sought a refined society could find really intellectual circles, for the old families—the Rutledges, Haynes, Pinckneys, Pringles, Hugers, Middletons, and others—prided themselves upon their books and ideas as well as plate, furniture, and Madeira.

Young Frémont was the son of a poor widow, who probably still took boarders for her support; and in this city of sharply

drawn class lines he could not have moved in the best circles until his brilliancy of mind attracted attention. South Carolinians doubtless knew the claims of the Whitings and Beverleys of Virginia to social distinction—they knew that Mrs. Frémont's line had been allied with Washington's. Charleston was never harshly puritanical, and many of its people would have sympathized with her tragic elopment. The Revolution had made only too many of the best Charleston families poverty-stricken themselves. Nevertheless, the moral canons of the Episcopalian city would have caused many who heard Mrs. Frémont's story to look at her askance. She soon became a member of St. Philip's Church, for she was a pious woman,¹⁴ and at sixteen, in 1829, Frémont himself was confirmed in this church. Indeed, we are told that until he was fourteen he was educated in the expectation that he would become an Episcopal minister. At St. Philip's and elsewhere it is probable that the Frémont family saw some of the most interesting people of Charleston without being part of their group.

But the boy soon began to make friends. He grew up wonderfully agile and hardy of body, active of mind and, with his dark hair, olive skin, penetrating blue eyes, and chiseled features, a very handsome lad. Charleston had no more attractive youngster than "Charley" Frémont. Every one befriended him. When he finished his early schooling, his mother, hoping that he could master a profession and earn a living at the same time, accepted John W. Mitchell's offer to give him a clerkship in his law office. But Mitchell was struck by the boy's quick mind, ardent temperament, taste for good literature, and instinctive refinement. The original plan to fit him for the pulpit was better, he decided, than training for the bar. Frémont then had, and kept throughout life, a decided religious conviction, which of course contributed to the decision. In pursuance of the idea, Mitchell met the cost of sending John Charles at fourteen—that is, in 1827—to a preparatory school kept by Dr. Charles Robertson, a Scot who had been educated at the University of

¹⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *New York Tribune*, July 4, 1856.

Edinburgh, and who specialized in preparing boys for Charleston College. Years later Robertson recalled the impression that Frémont had made upon him when he entered. He was a youth of "middle size, graceful in manners, rather slender, but well formed, and upon the whole what I should call handsome; of a keen piercing eye and a noble forehead, seemingly the very seat of genius."¹⁵ It was a stroke of fortune for Frémont's intellectual growth that he was thrown into early association with so learned and sympathetic a man.

In this school the boy first exhibited his quickness of apprehension, the rapidity of his progress astonishing his masters. Upon entrance, he knew only the rudiments of Latin; Robertson undertook to instruct him in that tongue, in Greek, and in mathematics, so that he could quickly matriculate at the college. He seemed, as Robertson said later, to master the ancient languages by intuition. In no time he was at the head of the class in Cæsar, and showed an equal excellence in Greek. Within a year he had read Cæsar, Nepos, Sallust, Horace, half of Virgil, two books of Livy, and four books of the *Iliad*. "Whatsoever he read," writes Robertson, "he retained." The retention was certainly not permanent, for there is little evidence in Frémont's writings of classical culture, and none at all of a taste in his busy later life for classical studies. But it is clear that the richness and novelty of the ancient writers, and the keen interest which Robertson showed in his progress, stimulated his mind. Robertson even found a "genius for poetic composition" in the boy—and we shall note later how some truly poetic phrases by Frémont have embedded themselves in the history of the West.

Such was his precocity that at the end of about two years' study, when only sixteen, he was able to enter Charleston College in the junior class. His work began on or about May 1, 1829, that marking the commencement of the college term. The institution was just being lifted to true collegiate grade by its new head, the Reverend Jasper Adams, formerly of Brown University; its curriculum emphasized mathematics, the classics,

¹⁵ John Robertson, *Anabasis*, Introduction.

and religion—one out of every four of the early graduates went into the ministry.¹⁶ In 1830 Frémont was one of the sixty-two students enrolled in the college classes. He showed a particular aptitude for mathematics—and this knowledge he always did retain. Dr. Robertson tells us he liked to pore over his volumes of the Greek dramatists in their beautiful Edinburgh print.¹⁷ Applying himself hard, he seemed for a time the pattern of an enthusiastic scholar. But he had more enthusiasm than scholarliness. His devotion to study displayed the zest and curiosity of the future explorer, not the application of a future savant. Greek especially, he wrote later, “had a mysterious charm, as if behind the strange characters belonging to an ancient world I was to find things of wonderful interest.” Robertson suspected that it was love of novelty and intellectual inquisitiveness, not sober devotion to learning, which inspired the lad. “When I contemplated his bold, fearless disposition,” he writes, “his powerful inventive genius, his admiration of warlike exploits, and his love of heroic and adventurous deeds, I did not think it likely he would be a minister of the gospel.” His classmates noted that he was taciturn and reserved, but of brilliant mind;¹⁸ and they soon perceived also that qualities of restlessness, instability, and rashness, were allied with his brilliancy.

For about nine months Frémont’s diligent application to his college studies continued. Then early in 1830 he was given leave of absence to go to the country and teach, probably as tutor in the household of some wealthy planter. He returned at the beginning of April, and after some delay—his books not having arrived with him—resumed his studies.¹⁹ For a time following this interruption all continued well. In the “Scientific Department” (for now all thought of the pulpit or law had ended) he held a high place among his classmates, who included such scions of leading Charleston families as C. C. Pinckney,

¹⁶ J. H. Easterby, *A History of the College of Charleston*, *passim*; David D. Wallace, *History of South Carolina*, III, pp. 24, 41.

¹⁷ John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, I, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Charleston News and Courier*, July 15, 1890.

¹⁹ MS. Faculty Journal, weekly record.

Theodore Grimké, Josiah Huger, and Nelson Mitchell. But Frémont had become a little spoiled. He learned too easily; he yielded too readily to his love of novelty and excitement. We must always remember the strange mixture of blood which flowed in his veins—his descent from an impulsive, high-spirited Virginia girl and from a Frenchman who had roved restlessly till the end of his days. We must remember that he had come into the world in a boarding-house, had been suckled in a carriage traversing endless dusty southern roads, had been surrounded in infancy by the changing panorama of the frontier, and had known no settled home till well past school age. His weeks of tutoring on some up-country plantation had now aroused his innate love of outdoor life, always fierce in intensity. Doubtless his mother, burdened with the cares of a poor widow trying to keep her home and children, was unable to control the impetuous lad.

It is remarkable how closely the fragments of young Frémont's personal history which have survived in his *Memoirs* or the recollections of others fit the pattern of his personality and tastes as exhibited in later years. At sixteen his salient traits—ardor, imagination, ambition, quickness, endurance, and reckless impetuosity—were well established. It was sheer impulsiveness, the heedlessness of a boy immersed in a calf-love affair, which made him suddenly drop his books and higher aims. He was mastering subjects that proved of great value to him in later years: mathematics, botany, and the elements of chemistry. He had won the regard not only of lawyers like Mitchell, but of the rector of St. Philip's, the Reverend Christopher Gadsden, later bishop, who had given him material assistance. But though the strict rules of Charleston College required all students to be on the "premises" seven hours daily except Saturday and Sunday, he began to cut classes, and when he did attend was ill-prepared. He was passionately in love—so he fancied.

For three years he had been intimate with a Creole family which had escaped the massacres in Santo Domingo following

the uprising under Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessalines, and had taken refuge in Charleston. Like himself, they spoke French. Of the five children, three girls and two boys, the eldest daughter was named Cecilia; a handsome girl, with clear ruddy skin, large dark eyes, and flowing blue-black hair. With the two boys, young Frémont ranged the woods behind Charleston, still wild and tangled, or sailed a boat down the bay to the historic islands, where they hunted or fished—sometimes going far out to sea. Occasionally, when the breeze failed and they drifted near the breakers pounding on the bar, they had the exhilaration—always keen to him—of physical peril. "I remember, as in a picture," he wrote nearly a half a century afterward,²⁰ "seeing the beads of perspiration on the forehead of my friend Henry as he tugged frantically at the oar when we found ourselves one day on Drunken Dick, a huge breaker that to our eyes appeared monstrous as he flung his spray close to the boat. For us it was really pull Dick, pull Devil. Those were the splendid outside days." But soon he was preoccupied with Cecilia. To be with her on some outdoor excursion was the acme of happiness. College was forgotten. In after years he sighed over this "bit of sunshine that made the glory of my youth"—over these "days of unreflecting life when I lived in the glow of a passion that now I know extended its refining influence over my whole life."

It was characteristic of Frémont that he took the consequence of his rashness with gay insouciance. He received formal warning from Dr. Adams, who had declared that he would make the college "a fountain of intelligence and virtue." But he persisted in staying away whole days until on February 5, 1831, within three months of his graduation he was dismissed for what the faculty journal calls "habitual irregularity and incorrigible negligence."²¹ Under the spell of his love affair, he cared naught for this supposed disgrace. The punishment itself he thought "sweet as a perfumed breeze," for it meant liberty. "I smiled to myself while I listened to words about the disappointment of

²⁰ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 20.

²¹ MS. Faculty Journal, February 5, 1831.

friends and the broken career. I was living in a charmed atmosphere and their edict only gave me complete freedom." With no thought of the harvest expected from him, he "gathered the cornflowers from the upspringing grain." For some time he carelessly enjoyed his days in the open and his evenings with Cecilia and her brothers, often prolonged to so late an hour as to arouse the ire of her tall, stern, gray-haired grandmother, who would break out in a torrent of French rebuke. But after a time Cecilia began to pall upon him. The continued reproaches of his elders made an impression, and his ambition reasserted itself.

It was sternly necessary, moreover, that he earn his bread and contribute to the family support. Fortunately, his reputation for brilliance and the fact that he been so near graduation helped him escape the worst consequences of his expulsion. His services as teacher were still in demand. For a time he served in John A. Wooten's private school, and in the "Apprentices' Library," a collection of books with some instructional facilities added. While teaching, he read in desultory but profitable fashion, and long afterward recalled gratefully two books, one contrasting certain men who had distinguished themselves by noble deeds with others who had made themselves infamous by base acts, and the other a Dutch work upon practical astronomy. The beautiful maps of constellations and the lucid tables of astronomical calculations fascinated him, and laid the foundation of his subsequent familiarity with the heavens.²²

Thus closed the first phase of Frémont's preparation for life; a preparation that possessed some fortunate aspects, but which would have been far better had it embodied a sterner discipline, a greater emphasis upon labor and planning. The second phase, now about to begin, was to be notable in two respects. It was to throw him into association with distinguished men, who would lend him powerful assistance; and it was to give him a

²² Charleston *Courier*, October 27, 1856; Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 21. By special action the college authorities gave Frémont the degree of B.A. on March 19, 1836, Minutes of the Board of Trustees, p. 263.

scientific training which, united with his nomadic tendencies, did much to equip him for eminence as an explorer. He had been unfortunate in his illegitimacy, his poverty, and his unruly youth; now he was to be fortunate in his patrons and in a solid grounding for scientific work.

II

An Explorer's Training

THE first important gift of fortune in Frémont's life—and he was to enjoy a long and spectacular series of such gifts—was the friendship of one of Charleston's most eminent citizens, Joel Roberts Poinsett. In the summer of 1830 Poinsett, then forty-nine, returned to Charleston after four and a half years as the first American Minister to Mexico. A member of St. Philip's and a friend of struggling Charleston College, he soon became acquainted with Frémont. He liked to give aid and advice to young men of promise, and singled out Edward McCrady, later known as general and historian, C. G. Memminger, who in time served in the Confederate Cabinet, and Frémont for special attention. All Frémont's distinction was destined to be won in government service, and it was Poinsett who obtained his first opening for him.

Perhaps Poinsett is best remembered to-day as introducer of the flamboyant poinsettia into the United States from Mexico. But actually he had many more valid titles to distinction.¹ He was one of the best-educated and most widely traveled Americans of his day. The son of a cultivated and moderately wealthy physician of Charleston, he had been schooled partly in Charleston, partly in Timothy Dwight's academy in Connecticut, and partly in England. He had then studied medicine in Edinburgh, but had turned from it first for military training at Woolwich, and then for legal study in Charleston. His health had been permanently injured by his first application to books, but not to an extent which impaired his energies; in old age he used

¹ See J. Fred Rippey's excellent biography, *Joel R. Poinsett, Versatile American*.

to say that despite the doctors, he had lived strenuously for sixty years. A period of travel early in the century took him over most of Western Europe, where he saw some of the best society of Paris, Vienna, and other capitals; into Russia, where he received marks of favor from Czar Alexander I and was invited to enter the imperial service; and as far to the east as the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. These extensive travels were an excellent training for his diplomatic years. When he returned home, Madison sent him in 1810 as commercial agent to South America, where he did much to promote the Chilean movement for independence from Spain. Then came service in Congress and the ministry to Mexico. His career in Mexico City was stormy, for the country was filled with disorder. He labored vigorously to sustain American rights and when he left, his old friend Commodore David Porter welcomed his "escape from that den of devils."

Frémont could have found no more useful friend than this influential gentleman. Living on the outskirts of Charleston in a white two-storied house, adorned with portico and columns, Poinsett made his weekly breakfasts a feature of the city's social life. Once a week he collected at his table the most charming women and intelligent men he could find; distinguished visitors always made their way there, and President Monroe was a guest when he visited Charleston in 1819. Though a man of short stature and plain, modest manners, Poinsett was an accomplished conversationalist and story-teller. The imagination of young Frémont, sitting at his board, was kindled by the recital of his wanderings and adventures. Poinsett, attracted by the vivacious manners and handsome person of the lad, learned that he was eager to see the world, and would like a naval or military appointment.

To this friendship with Poinsett we may largely trace one important fact in Frémont's career: the fact that, born a Southerner, bred and schooled a Southerner, throughout life he remained warmly attached to the Union and free from any sectional views. Poinsett was the principal leader of the Union men

of South Carolina in the Nullification controversy of 1830-32, the most trusted lieutenant of President Jackson in his contest with Calhoun, Hayne, and the other Nullifiers. When leaving Washington for Charleston in the spring of 1830, he had told Jackson that he would oppose "the strange and pernicious doctrine advanced by some of the leading men of our State." Frémont was a witness of the excited meetings held by the two parties in Charleston during 1831, ending in a Nullification victory in the city elections. He witnessed the still stormier events of 1832, when in the canvass for a new legislature Poinsett and the Unionists again went down in defeat. The entire state government was now in control of the Nullifiers, who had determined upon a defiance of the Federal Government. While Frémont was quietly teaching school in November, 1832, a state convention passed an ordinance declaring the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832 null and void, and authorizing the legislature to take steps to prevent their enforcement. President Jackson answered in December with a proclamation warning South Carolina that disunion by armed force was treason. He immediately sent the sloop of war *Natchez* to Charleston, and in January, 1833, ordered General Winfield Scott to the city to halt by armed force any attempt to seize the forts.

For some months intense excitement reigned in the proud little capital. Early in 1833, when Jackson wrote Poinsett that if necessary he could throw from ten to fifteen thousands troops into Charleston within two weeks, an outbreak of war between the state and Federal governments seemed possible. The *Natchez* was expected to sustain the national authority even if it had to bombard the town. Fortunately Henry Clay and others who counseled a compromise prevailed, and in March, when the Nullification ordinance was rescinded in return for a Federal law reducing the tariff, the storm blew over.² The visit of the *Natchez*, which had shotted its guns and taken precautions against fire-ships, ended in a round of balls and other social

² Claude G. Bowers, *Party Battles of the Jackson Period*, pp. 254ff.; 268ff.; 285.

courtesies. In April, the vessel returned to Hampton Roads, and in May, it sailed on a cruise to South America. With it went Frémont, just twenty years old, in the capacity of teacher of mathematics. No naval academy as yet existing, such teachers were required for the 450 midshipmen, who were assigned to cruising ships, navy yards, or schools ashore.³ He had obtained his appointment through Poinsett, who disapproved of his entry into the navy, but was glad to help him seek a larger sphere than he could find in Charleston.

His only hesitation was in parting from his mother, who had to be left entirely alone. Warmth of heart is reflected in the lines he wrote long afterward: ⁴

We were only two, my mother and I. We had lost my sister. My brother was away, making his own career, and I had to concern myself for mine. I was unwilling to leave my mother. Circumstances had more than usually endeared us to each other, and I knew that her life would be solitary without me. I was accustomed to be much at home and our separations had been slight. But now it was likely to be for long and the hard part would be for the one left alone. With me it was very different. Going out into the excitement of strange scenes and occurrences I would be forced out of myself.... But my mother had an experience of sacrifice which with her true womanly nature it had been hard to learn. Realizing that now the time had come for another, she, but not cheerfully, sent me forward on my way.

Though this naval interlude responded to Frémont's innate love of wandering, later in life he looked back upon it as dull and without bearing on his future. The routine of ship life was tedious. The captain, Zantzinger, made no impression on him. But he did extract a few advantages from the monotonous cruise. One was association with David Farragut, lieutenant or executive officer of the ship; ⁵ a vigorous, able man still in his early thirties, though a veteran of the War of 1812, in which

³ *Register of Debates in Congress*, 22d Congress, 2d Session, IX, 1666-75.

⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 21, 22.

⁵ Alfred T. Mahan, *Life of Admiral Farragut*, p. 75.

he had served as midshipman. Another advantage was the opportunity of exploring some of the principal ports of South America, of which Frémont writes that he saw more than a traveler usually does. They touched at Buenos Aires, whence the tyrant Rosas was ruling the best part of the Argentine with a steel grip. At Rio de Janeiro, Frémont and another youth were instrumental in preventing bloodshed in a senseless duel. Two young officers of the ship, a South Carolinian and a New Englander, had quarreled, exchanged challenges, and selected Frémont and this other youth as seconds. Only a short time before two midshipmen had fought a duel, and one had been killed. The seconds now held a conference and agreed that they would charge the pistols with powder only; but that if another shot was insisted upon, they would then load with ball. The officers were rowed ashore, took their stand at twelve paces, and fired pointblank. Both looked astonished and relieved when they found themselves unscathed. Thereupon the seconds hurried up, and asserting that the quarrel was not sufficiently grave to justify another shot, declared the affair closed. "Hurst and I," writes Frémont, "greatly enjoyed our little *ruse de guerre*."

Before long he was back in Charleston; and here, fortunately, circumstances gave him a better opportunity ashore than any available at sea. But for a time he was genuinely tempted to remain afloat. Congress had provided for several professorships of mathematics in the navy at \$1,200 a year; ⁶ Frémont applied for a commission, and being ordered before an examining board at Norfolk, spent a month at home in preparation. "The strong motive I had now added to the pleasure I always found in study. All day long I was at my books, and the earliest dawn found me at an upper window against which stood a tall poplar, where the rustling of the glossy leaves made a soothing accompaniment." He successfully passed the examination, but the appointment was no sooner in his hands than he declined it. He had been offered an opportunity to help Captain W. S. Williams of

⁶ Act of March 3, 1835; compare J. R. Soley, *History of the Naval Academy*, p. 27.

the United States Topographical Corps survey the route of the projected Louisville, Cincinnati & Charleston Railroad. Once more Poinsett was his good angel, for the statesman, long interested in internal improvements, was leader of a committee to promote this railroad in South Carolina. He believed that Charleston might be made an outlet for the commerce of the West and Northwest, and that this link between the two sections would strengthen the Union—perhaps even bring a large immigration of free whites into the South, and thus weaken slavery. Frémont, accepting employment as a surveyor, moved a step nearer the field in which he was to achieve his fame.

It is not difficult to imagine the zest with which the youth, always passionately fond of wild natural scenery, exchanged the tedium of a warship for the forest and mountain range. His immediate superior was Lieutenant Richard M. White, a South Carolinian graduated from West Point and now in civil life,⁷ who made the hard work of their party, one of several running trial lines, agreeable. Spending the day in surveys, they would return to a farm-house or inn for a hearty supper, and sometimes be up till midnight plotting their notes. The weather in the Carolina and Tennessee mountains was fine, water abundant, and the scenery delightful. Fifty years later, Frémont, recalling the beauty and fragrance of the white azaleas, wrote: "The survey was a kind of picnic, with work enough to give it zest, and we were all sorry when it was over."⁸

If we may believe some ill-natured gossip collected (and doubtless expanded) by political opponents in 1856, scenery and outdoor exertion were not the sole attractions of the summer. He spent part of it boarding at the Mansion House in Greenville, South Carolina. Citizens of the town found him a lighthearted, active and strikingly handsome youth with a taste for society. "He became acquainted with a very pretty girl, in moderate circumstances," one of them wrote twenty years

⁷ G. W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the U. S. Military Academy*, I, p. 160.

⁸ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 24.

later,⁹ "and, as she lived in front of the house I occupied, I had every opportunity of seeing the *love* exhibited by the couple, on very many occasions. He was engaged to her, and deserted her without a cause, and the family were very much distressed about the matter. I have witnessed the intimacy myself, and the facts are notorious in our town at this time." The writer adds that Frémont's mother, who had remarried and was known as Mrs. Hale, subsequently spent a summer in Greenville and was deeply disturbed by the way in which her son had treated the girl. The editor of the *Greenville Patriot and Mountaineer* made the corroborative statement in 1856 that Frémont "became engaged to a young lady here, and we understand that the time was appointed for their wedding, and he proved false to his plighted faith." The girl's heart was not broken, for in time she married. The episode harmonizes with what Frémont tells us of his love affair with Cecilia in Charleston, and with what we know of his ardent courtship with Jessie Benton in Washington later. It is not to his credit, but the only safe inference is that he was impetuous in matters of the heart as in everything else.

The autumn of 1836 found him once more unemployed; and again an unexpected chance took him a step nearer his true vocation of explorer. The government, in pursuance of its policy of removing the principal Indian tribes from the Eastern States to areas beyond the Mississippi, was about to transfer the Cherokees. Having established prosperous homes in the land ceded them by Georgia in 1783, and in neighboring strips of North Carolina and Tennessee, the Cherokees desperately opposed the step. Georgia authorities were insistent, and hostilities threatened. For military purposes if war broke out, and for facilitating the distribution of land among white settlers if it did not, the government needed a rough survey of the region. Captain Williams was ordered to make a military reconnaissance of this thinly settled, half-wild country, and chose Frémont as an assistant. Here, on a rawer frontier than he had yet

⁹ Charleston *Courier*, October 27, 1856.

seen, the young man began his principal life-work—as he says in his *Memoirs*, found the path in which he was to walk. “The occupation of my prime of life was to be among Indians and in waste places. There were to be no more years wasted in tentative efforts to find a way for myself. The work was laid out and it began here with a remarkable continuity of purpose.”¹⁰

This winter survey, 1836-37, had to be carried out with haste, and the mountain country of the Cherokees presented numerous obstacles and hardships. A young man with sedentary tastes or a soft streak would have found it intolerable. To Frémont the novelty, adventure, and strenuous effort were fascinating. Williams’s party was split into a number of squads assigned to separate tasks. Sometimes Frémont would be sent out with a single guide to make a sketch of some lonely stream or mountain spur; sometimes he would accompany a half-dozen men, with pack-mules carrying tents and food, sent to map a better-inhabited district. It was a heavily forested region, with Indian farms thinly scattered along the broad, fertile valleys. If lucky, the rangers could halt at night at some Indian cabin; if they were deep in the woods they set up their half-faced tents, built great fires of hickory logs, and roasted the choicest parts of one of the many wild hogs fattening on acorns. Frémont learned to make the most of the services of a frontier guide—he had one named Loudermilk, intimately acquainted with the region. He learned to pack a motley assortment of provisions, tools, cooking utensils, and bedding on mule-back so tightly as to resist steep trails and brushing boughs; to make an appetizing meal from a little flour, water, and raw meat; to pitch a tent in a snowdrift, with an icy wind blinding him with sleet. He mastered a hundred lessons of woodcraft. The joy of lonely hills and glowing sunsets; of sinking to sleep by glowing coals, the wind singing in the pines and the whippoorwills making the hills echo, entered his blood.

Another element of instruction lay in the opportunity of studying the semicivilized Indians of the country. Some of them,

¹⁰ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 25.

living on farms as good as those of white men, exhibited a considerable degree of culture. Making a reconnaissance of the Hiwassee River, he stopped at an Indian's house which, built on a high bluff with carefully planed logs and glazed windows, was a handsome example of forest architecture. The Cherokee villages were clean, orderly, and comfortable. But a small element among the tribe, as Frémont noted, had been corrupted by the proximity of rough whites. He sometimes attended Indian feasts which broke up, when the Cherokees became maddened with liquor, in bloody affrays, the braves slashing each other with knives. Reaching one Cherokee village while the men were having a carouse and dangerously drunk, he and his companions were hidden for the night by squaws in a rat-infested corn-crib. Next morning they bathed in the Nantaheyle River: "There was ice along the banks, and the water in my hair froze into fretful quills."

In this survey Frémont reached the conclusion, afterward more strongly impressed upon him, that the Indians were capable of being civilized, that their culture depended upon their physical and social surroundings, and that the Washington authorities were too changeable, lax, and political-minded to be trustworthy agents for their care. He was later to find that their development varied from the high level of John Ross and his Cherokee followers to the degradation of the Digger Indians of the Great Basin. He also concluded that the Christianization of the Indians by missionaries was of the utmost importance, and that here again stability and continuity of effort were required. While he speaks with admiration of the courage and indifference to pain shown by the Cherokees, he seems to have made no friendships among them. And it is noteworthy that he refers to their expulsion, in its circumstances one of the cruellest acts in our national history, as a measure beneficial both to Indians and whites.¹¹

¹¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 24, 25; for the real character of the removal see Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes*, p. 229ff.

All too soon the Cherokee reconnaissance ended. Frémont returned to Charleston to stay with his mother and renew old friendships. Now twenty-four, he was in the full vigor of young manhood, tanned, lithe, and hardy. He had evidently acquitted himself well in all his employments, for Poinsett continued to think highly of him. Various parts of his training—his solid grounding in mathematics, his experience as a surveyor, his partial knowledge of navigation, of which he had gained a smattering on shipboard, his recent intimacy with frontier conditions, his wood-lore—constituted a valuable preparation for the career now about to open before him. Though he had never received the hard discipline which his character most needed, he had been given more of it than ever before. Poinsett had become Secretary of War under Van Buren. He was as keenly interested in science as ever, and his department was especially concerned with trans-Mississippi exploration. These facts were to mean much to the young man.

III

First View of the Great West

SECRETARY POINSETT, knowing what Frémont most wanted, brought him to Washington early in 1838 and took steps to have him commissioned second lieutenant in the Topographical Corps. The young man arrived in the capital at an auspicious moment. The War Department had determined upon a new western survey—an examination of the wide plateau country between the upper Mississippi and upper Missouri rivers; and a distinguished foreign scientist, Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, had been chosen to conduct it. Poinsett planned to include his protégé in the expedition. When Frémont heard of his assignment, he was exuberantly elated. The flat, frowsy little capital had at first seemed a distasteful place to him. He possessed no friends outside Poinsett's family; there were no amusements beyond watching the alternate reigns of mud and dust along the single important street, Pennsylvania Avenue; and the ugliness of the surroundings weighed upon his spirits. He missed such spots as the Battery in Charleston, where both eye and mind could feel their freedom; space, he moralized later,¹ "reacts on the mind, which unconsciously expands to larger limits and freer range of thought." His body was so inured to constant exercise that a routine of streets, offices, and boarding-houses affected him with physical malaise. To be sent to the romantic West, the land of Indians, buffalo, and stupendous natural wonders, was an incredible bit of luck. He went forward with little delay to St. Louis, making the trip by stage over the Alleghenies and steamboat down the Ohio and up the Mississippi.

¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 30.

Nicollet, who thus at Poinsett's request took Frémont as chief assistant, was a commanding figure, certain to make a strong impression on the young man. Fifty-two years old, he was in the prime of life. A member of the Legion of Honor, a man who had missed election to the Academy of Sciences by only one vote, a mathematician who had stood high in the circle of Laplace and Arago, one-time secretary of the Observatory in Paris and professor at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, he had come to America only when ruined by disastrous speculations on the Bourse.² His imagination had been touched by the exploits of La Salle and Champlain, and he hoped to make some worthy addition to the record of French explorations in the West. With his Parisian background, his friendships with eminent Europeans, his skill in music, his natural urbanity and polish, he became a social favorite wherever he went. Reaching New Orleans in 1832, he soon made friends in its hospitable Franco-American society, which was touched by the spectacle of a once-wealthy man who had fled from the painful scenes of his ruin. He first used what little funds he had in exploring the southern Appalachians and ascending the Red River and Arkansas River, labors which brought him to the notice of army officers. Then, going to St. Louis, he won the support of the rich fur-trading house of Chouteau & Company. It shared his view as to the desirability of more information regarding parts of the Indian country; and in 1836 he set out for a tour of the upper Mississippi, intending to determine its sources with astronomical accuracy. He encountered various adventures among the Chippewa—for he gave much time to the customs, manners, and languages of Indian tribes—and spent the winter with the officers of Fort Snelling. The War Department had furnished him letters to them and to Indian agents on the frontier, and had lent him instruments, but did no more.³

In 1837, with funds exhausted and health seriously impaired,

² See articles on Nicollet in *La Grande Encyclopedie; Dictionary of American Biography*.

³ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, I (1872), p. 183ff.

Nicollet was back in civilization, recuperating among his Catholic friends at St. Mary's College in Baltimore. He had accomplished a notable feat of exploration. Visiting Lake Itasca, he had traced its principal affluent, now known as Nicollet's Infant Mississippi, several miles to the southwest; and it is agreed by historians that he divides with Schoolcraft the honor of discovering the real source of the river, and indeed accomplished more than Schoolcraft. Poinsett heard of him and sent what Nicollet calls a "flattering invitation" to repair to Washington. There they talked in detail of further plans for exploring the upper Northwest. Nicollet wished to make a geographical and topographical map of the whole country, and the Secretary of War approved. Such a work was much needed. Pike had made a march in the winter of 1806 to the headwaters of the Mississippi, and a few others had followed in his path. Lewis and Clark had explored the Missouri to its supposed sources. But the vast fan-shaped area between the heads of the two rivers was as yet little known to any save fur-traders. In 1823 Major Stephen H. Long, accompanied by a mineralogist from the University of Pennsylvania, had made a rapid trip up the Minnesota River, down the Red River to the Canadian line, and thence along the boundary to Lake Superior. His work proved the fertility of the great valleys of the Minnesota and Red rivers, later the richest wheat lands on the continent, but it was too hurried to show much else. In 1835 George H. Featherstonhaugh, an Englishman who had entered the Federal service, made a "geological reconnaissance" for the government to the Coteau des Prairies in southwestern Minnesota and northeastern South Dakota. He published a report, but his expedition also was too hasty to furnish any important contribution to knowledge.⁴ A wide field lay open to Nicollet.

For Frémont to become associated with such a scientist was a triple piece of luck. He soon learned from him ten times as much about scientific exploration, mapping, and description as he could have obtained at any American school. Indeed, Nicollet

⁴ W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, pp. 178, 179.

trained him in mathematics, surveying, botanical and geological observation, and topographical mapwork until he had become thoroughly proficient, and within five years Frémont was able to step boldly into Nicollet's shoes. Nicollet also brought Frémont into touch with some of the best society of Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis, and other cities. Finally, Frémont's name was at once prominently associated with an expedition which engaged the interest of every one concerned with western development; and Nicollet never scanted the credit given him.

In St. Louis, Frémont enjoyed a pleasant interval of leisure while the party was outfitting. Not only did he make friends among military men—among them Robert E. Lee, a captain of engineers, just then busy with Mississippi improvements, whose polite manners and helpfulness made an enduring impression upon him—but he was taken by Nicollet among the old French residents. These circles, proud of their distinguished countryman, offered a profuse hospitality. Invitation to dinners, receptions, or dances, were showered upon the two men, while Frémont frequently accompanied Nicollet, who was intimate with the clergy, to agreeable suppers in the refectory of the Catholic cathedral. Meanwhile, the house of Chouteau was equipping the expedition, its officers selecting both stores and men; the latter for the most part practised voyageurs in the fur company's employ. At his own expense, Nicollet employed Charles Geyer, a German botanist, to accompany the expedition. The lieutenant was intensely interested in the strange new scenes—in the turbid, yellow flood of the Mississippi, rolling past the town, with flatboats, rafts, and keel-boats dotting the waters, and an occasional steamboat pouring smoke from two high pipes above its gingerbread hull; the lazy, grunting Indians, hugging the shade on hot spring afternoons; the buckskin-garbed, long-haired trappers, ready to pour their tales of adventure into his ears in rough French. This elation and curiosity accompanied him through the summer expedition of 1838, which surveyed a long strip westward from the headwaters of the Mississippi.⁵

⁵ See Nicollet's MS Journals and Reports, Library of Congress.

Their steamboat made a rapid trip up the river to the mouth of the St. Peter's or Minnesota River, where Henry Sibley commanded a whole province of the American Fur Company, in which he was a partner. His district, in fact, extended from the upper Mississippi westward to the heads of the Missouri tributaries, and northwest to Pembina on the Canadian line, embracing most of what is now Minnesota, the Dakotas, and southern Manitoba. A large number of fur posts, with traders, clerks, and voyageurs, were under his charge; the chief being at Lac Traverse, Lac qui Parle (both fortified), Traverse des Sioux, Little Rapids, and Coteau des Prairies. The French-Canadian voyageurs, enlisted for three years at Montreal and paid in livres, were supplied with provisions and goods, visited Indian camps, and returned laden with beaver and other pelts. Sibley maintained discipline with an iron hand. His headquarters were at the hamlet of St. Peter's (now Mendota), where stood a large fur depot; near at hand was a small white settlement in log houses, a Sioux village, and, on the high bluff between the Minnesota and Mississippi, the heavy stone walls of Fort Snelling.⁶

With Sibley, a tall, handsome young man of about Frémont's own years, the lieutenant spent many profitable hours. Born and educated in Detroit, the son of a politically influential lawyer, Sibley had abandoned his legal studies at eighteen to become a sutler's clerk on the Sault-Ste. Marie, and within a year joined the American Fur Company at Mackinac. Serving here for five years, he fell in love with the picturesque, dangerous, profitable business of fur trading. For two winters he was purchasing-agent of supplies in Ohio, riding thousands of miles on horseback to buy corn, flour, tobacco, pork, and other commodities. Then, when John Jacob Astor sold out his holdings in 1834 and the company was reorganized, Sibley became part owner, and went at once to St. Peter's. Now, his remarkable career as lawmaker and administrator all before him, he was living the life of a bachelor frontiersman, engrossed in trade and adventure. His house was a hunting-lodge, filled with Irish

⁶ W. P. Shortridge, *Transition of a Typical Frontier*, p. 15ff.

wolfhounds, guns, and saddles, and he was fond of long hunting excursions.⁷ His influence over the Indians, who admired his prowess with arms, his powerful frame, and his decision of character, was remarkable, and Frémont learned much from it. While the expedition spent several weeks in completing its outfit and making astronomical observations, the young explorer fraternized with Sibley; wandered about the fort; admired the charms of a Sioux girl whose name, "Beautiful Day," he never forgot; and absorbed the atmosphere of this borderland between civilization and savagery.

Their ensuing expedition, made with one-horse carts driven by voyageurs, took them first up the Minnesota some hundred and fifteen miles to the fur-trading post at Traverse des Sioux, where the river makes an abrupt bend toward the northwest; and thence westward over the high plains to the Red Pipestone Quarry, an abrupt bluff about three miles in length composed of red rocks of different shades. It was devoid of any peril or special excitement. Near the Traverse lay the summer encampment of the Sisseton Sioux, and as the expedition halted beside their principal village, Frémont found another opportunity to study Indian life. The excitability of the savages impressed him:

We were occupied quietly among the Indians, Mr. Nicollet, as usual, surrounded by them, with the aid of the interpreter getting them to lay out the form of the lake and the course of the streams entering the river near by...; Geyer, followed by some Indians, curiously watching him while digging up plants; and I, more numerously attended, pouring out the quicksilver for the artificial horizon, each in his way busy at work; when suddenly everything started into motion, the Indians running tumultuously to a little rise which commanded a view of the prairie, all clamor and excitement. The commotion was caused by the appearance of two or three elk on the prairie horizon.⁸

⁷ W. W. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, I, p. 161ff.; Nathaniel West, *Life of H. H. Sibley*, *passim*; Theodore C. Blagen, *Building Minnesota*, p. 112ff.

⁸ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 34, 35.

In marching to the Red Pipestone Quarry, they crossed the plateau (Coteau des Prairies) which divides the Mississippi and Missouri valleys. Here Nicollet explored one chain of lakes, Frémont another. As they approached the Quarry a thunderstorm broke, delighting the Sioux as confirmation of their legend that the Spirit of the Red Pipestone spoke in thunder and lightning whenever the bluff was visited. Then as the sun burst forth, under its rays the distant cliff loomed up like some ruined city of marble and porphyry.⁹

They carefully examined the Quarry, a place of resort for all the neighboring tribes. The pipestone lay in a stratum about eighteen inches thick, overlaid by perhaps twenty-six feet of hard reddish sandstone. The water in the little valley below had caused the buffalo to pour through it in their annual migrations, and tradition related that the tread of these countless herds had exposed the pipestone. Spending three days here in company with a party of friendly Sioux, Nicollet's men helped the Indians by blasting the vein free with gunpowder. The explorers then resumed their march, this time northward over the plateau to the Lac qui Parle. They found the air of the high plains, 1,500 feet above sea-level and studded with lakes, sparkling and invigorating. Reaching Lac qui Parle, they camped at the trading-post maintained under the American Fur Company by the Renville family, where Frémont found another valuable mentor. Joseph Renville was a half-breed born in this region, who had been a captain in the British forces in the War of 1812, had accompanied the expeditions of Zebulon Pike and Major S. H. Long as guide, and had become one of the shrewdest fur-traders of the Northwest.¹⁰ Near Lac qui Parle he maintained for the company a stockaded post, Fort Renville, the base for a large force of voyageurs, half-breed hunters, and hangers-on, whom he dominated in an easy baronial fashion. He needed their protection for his herds of horses, cattle, and sheep; they needed

⁹ Nicollet, *Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River*, pp. 15, 16.

¹⁰ Rev. E. D. Neill, "A Sketch of Joseph Renville," *Minnesota Historical Collections*, I, p. 196ff.

the employment and bounty which he and the company gave them. Once more the lieutenant had an opportunity to observe how a man of energy, decision, and tact exercised a sway over large bodies of Indians, for Renville and his son were regarded with admiring deference by the savages who roamed the regions westward and northward for hundreds of miles. Frémont aptly calls him a border chief.

They stayed for some time at Fort Renville, enjoying the fresh meat, milk, and vegetables; watching the Indians play lacrosse; and exploring the country. Homeward bound, Nicollet surveyed the Le Sueur, while Frémont was sent to examine the Mankato, a deep stream walled by high narrow banks or cliffs, its stone escarpments frequently of great beauty. Then they returned to the protection of Fort Snelling and the comforts of Sibley's lodge. Nicollet spoke in high praise of Frémont. He was convinced, writes Sibley, "that the modest and unassuming youth, if his life should be spared, would, in due time, carve out for himself a distinguished position among the *savans* of the age."¹¹

Frémont concluded this first season of the Nicollet expedition by a glorious hunting trip, undertaken with Sibley and an experienced officer of the fur company, Jean Baptiste Faribault, head of the post at Little Rapids.¹² The three took with them a whole Sioux village under the chief Red Dog, an excitable, clamorous crowd, and set off in the crisp November weather. After some days they reached the Iowa hunting grounds, stretches of prairie intersected with well-watered woods, and gave themselves up to killing deer and elk. It was a royal hunt, Frémont records. To the end of his life he recalled the pleasures of camping at night along the woods, with "bright fires, where fat venison was roasting on stocks before them, or stewing with

¹¹ H. H. Sibley, "Memoir of Nicollet," *Minnesota Historical Collections*, I, p. 190.

¹² Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 37, 38. Sibley in his "Reminiscences," *Minnesota Historical Collections*, III, pp. 254-256, describes a hunting-party with Frémont and Faribault, but assigns it to 1840, when Frémont was not in the West. Frémont's date of 1838 must therefore be accepted, though the year may have been 1830.

corn or wild rice in pots hanging from tripods; squaws busy over the cooking, and children rolling about over the ground. No sleep is better or more restoring than follows such a dinner, earned by such a day.”¹³ They met some ordinary hardships and risks, including a prairie fire whose roar and glare aroused them in the dead of night from a sound sleep, and gave them just time to set a counter fire and transfer their beasts and belongings to cleared ground before it swept past in a sheet of flame. They had an intimate view of Indian life. Each family owned one or more ponies, who dragged the household articles on poles. At streams the squaws were expected to carry the baggage across on their shoulders. Frémont remarks that one day on the march a squaw dropped behind, but trudged into camp a little after the others carrying a baby a few hours old.

December, 1838, found the Nicollet party in St. Louis, preparing for the work of the next year, which was to carry them to the upper Missouri. Just after Christmas Frémont was sent on to Washington with official despatches, letters to Nicollet’s friends, and a verbal report for Poinsett.¹⁴ A few weeks later his chief followed him. Returning to Missouri in the spring, they hired five men as the nucleus of their new party, including Louis Zindel, a Prussian artilleryman skilled in making rockets, and a famous frontiersman and trapper, Etienne Provôt. One of the best of the “mountain men,” hardly excelled in his knowledge of the wild West by even Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, his name is commemorated by the city of Provo, Utah.

The little party left St. Louis as soon as the annual rise of the Missouri followed the melting of the Rocky Mountain snows; that is, on April 4, 1839, on the steamer *Antelope* of the American Fur Company. It required nearly two and a half months to struggle northward against the turbid, rushing current. Their little vessel, traveling only by day, and carrying

¹³ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Nicollet to F. R. Hassler, from St. Louis, December 25, 1838, introducing Frémont; Hassler Papers, New York Public Library. In this letter Nicollet speaks of Frémont as “my special friend, very anxious to make your acquaintance, and very capable of appreciating your achievements.”

sixty or seventy French or half-breed employees of the fur company, rasped against snags and ground over sand-bars; at times the current was so swift that the boat would hang perfectly motionless, seeming to rally her strength till, with a roar of the exhaust pipes, she would fight her way into smoother waters. Torn branches, uprooted shrubs, and other debris sailed past them in the yellow water. Wicked-looking snags lifted their heads above the current. Moreover, it was almost impossible at times to find the channel, for the Missouri continually changed its course, wearing away ragged islands and cutting across peninsulas. For the steamboat to lose her way in the shallows was to thrust herself into a thick chevaux-de-frise of trees and limbs brought down by the flood, embedded like a military abattis in the sand. Nicollet sketched the stream from daybreak until nine o'clock, Frémont from nine to two, and Geyer from two until nightfall. They were totally unable to recognize many of the bends and bluffs described by Lewis and Clark.¹⁵

As they pushed on the river grew lonelier and lonelier, and the intense stillness, broken only by the echo from the exhaust pipes, the washing of the waves, and the sudden splash of a distant bank caving into the water, impressed their imaginations. At first the country was monotonous, but the shore-line became steadily more attractive. Sometimes they found themselves running between high perpendicular cliffs of gray and yellow rock, with shrubbery and trees nodding over their brows; sometimes the river opened out into a flat expanse over which it wandered in several channels, like a delta breaking into the sea. When hilly country came into view on the west bank, Nicollet and Frémont went ashore to examine the geological character of several bluffs. Finally, on the seventieth day they reached Fort Pierre, 1,271 miles above St. Louis, named for Pierre Chouteau—the principal post of the American Fur Company on the upper Missouri. This was near the center of present-day South Dakota, surrounded on all sides by the wild

¹⁵ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 38; Nicollet, *Report*, pp. 29-42.

country of the Indian and buffalo. A large village of Yankton Sioux stood several miles distant, and Nicollet at once gave their chiefs, a noble-looking set of men, gifts to ratify their promises of good-will and free passage.

This time Frémont participated in the equipment of a fairly large expedition, for they hired a number of new men, including Louison Frenière, a half-breed guide from Fort Pierre who had a local fame as hunter and scout; one Dorion, son of the post interpreter; and William Dixon, another well-known guide. When Provôt announced on July 1st that all was ready, the party was ordered to the east bank. Its crossing took most of two days, for heavy rains had swollen the river to a width of a mile and a half. On calling the roll, they found that in all they were nineteen strong. This seemed a small force if the Sioux proved hostile, but relying on their arms, on Zindel's rockets, and on the hope of reinforcements from Lac qui Parle, they joined in a lusty huzza, and set forth.¹⁶

Their path lay northeast toward the rising sun, over the plateau termed by the half-breeds the Coteau de Missouri, nearly two thousand feet above sea-level. The bed of the Missouri lay nearly five hundred feet below this plateau. Frémont's days, as they pushed outward by astronomical reckoning, were at first full of leisure, for the level plain required little sketching or description. He spent them chiefly with Frenière, as hunter. The two rode far ahead to spy out the country and kill buffalo; game was abundant, and their only anxiety was to find sufficient water and wood. For a young man of twenty-six, this employment as vidette was exhilarating. The grand simplicity of the prairie, its grass thrown into waves by the wind, the broad cloud-shadows chasing each other across its sunny bosom, held an impressive beauty. On hot afternoons they saw the giant thunderheads mount like blue snow-capped peaks in the West. The long rolling slopes were gay with puccoon, red Indian-pipe, mullen flower, and wild rose; as they reached more broken country, silver streams laced the green prairie at

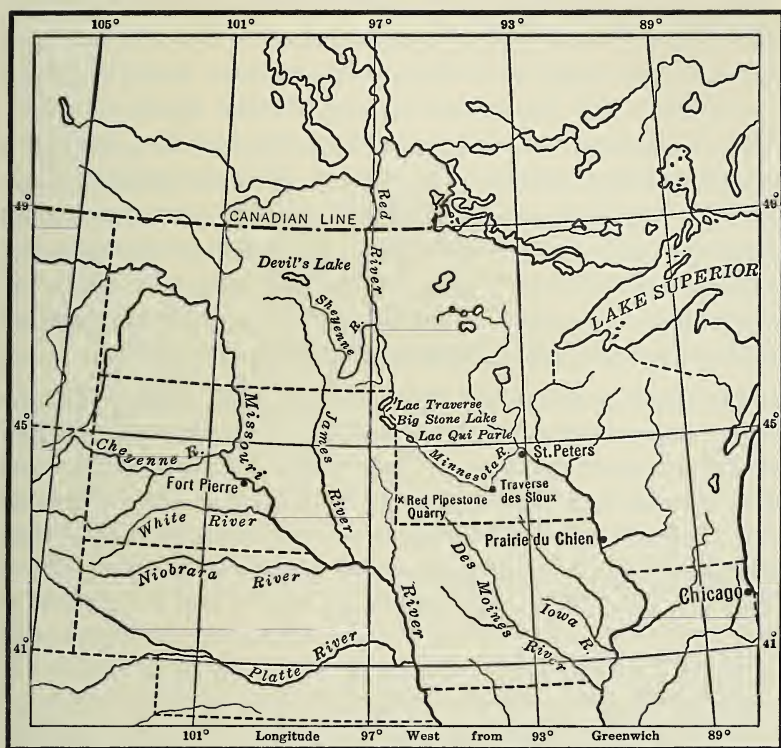
¹⁶ Nicollet, *Report*, pp. 43, 44.

intervals, and sometimes they came upon pretty lakelets, bordered with rocks, aspens, and grasses growing into the water.¹⁷ The lieutenant took an eager interest in the moving shapes glimpsed on the horizon, and in Frenière's skill in determining, at astonishing distances, whether they were antelope, buffalo, or Indians. Where another man would have distinguished nothing, his practised eye told him which was enemy and which friend. Finally, toward the eastern limits of the plateau, Dixon led them through dark ravines and over steep hills till he suddenly brought them out on the precise point he desired—a headland with a magnificent view over the immense basin of the James River. As they gazed in admiration, he exclaimed: "You wanted geography; look—there's geography for you!"¹⁸

It was an exciting moment for the young explorer when, in the district between the James and Sheyenne rivers (now North Dakota), they came into touch with illimitable buffalo herds moving slowly southwest toward the plains bordering the upper Missouri. Here were ponderous old bulls, enormous in size and weight, their eyes gleaming from matted forelocks, their manes hanging shaggily down their necks, and patches of last year's hair standing like tattered islands on their backs; lean and restless cows; and, under their anxious eyes, calves playing antics through the herd. The face of the wide prairie, far as the eye could reach, was dotted with them. They trooped along in columns beside the expedition, or gathered in grazing knots; farther beyond, they were seen scrambling, tails erect, over sudden hillocks; and in the remote distance the pale blue swells were peppered with groups and individuals. For three days Frémont and Nicollet were in the midst of this concourse of bison, threading their way through the herds by day and so closely pressed by them at night that it was necessary to picket all the horses and mules, and to hobble the more restive. It was a memorable experience, and the spirits of the party, depressed

¹⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 40; Nicollet, *Report*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Nicollet, *Report*, p. 45



MINNESOTA-DAKOTA, SHOWING PLACES VISITED BY FRÉMONT

COURTESY OF THE NICOLLET-FRÉMONT EXPLORATIONS

by some days of ninety-three degree heat, flies, and fatigue, at once rose.

The expedition had just pushed through the buffalo to a branch of the Sheyenne when Frémont brought in three Indians, who announced that encampments of about two thousand Sioux were hard by, slaughtering game and preparing for a grand "surround" of buffalo. It would have been dangerous to interfere with the maneuver, and Nicollet wisely sent Frenière to request the chiefs to point out the best time and route for the whites to continue their march. With characteristic hospitality, the Sioux invited Nicollet's party to visit their camp. Received with talks, dances, songs, and other ceremonials, the explorers distributed presents, after which they were bidden to the lodges of the chiefs to dine. In return Nicollet gave a feast at his own camp, which Frémont engagingly describes: ¹⁹

The chiefs sat around in a large circle on buffalo robes or blankets, each provided with a deep soup plate and a spoon of tin. The first dish was a generous pot-au-feu, principally of fat buffalo meat and rice. No one would begin until all the plates were filled. When all was ready the feast began. With the first mouthful each Indian silently laid down his spoon, and each looked at the other. After a pause of bewilderment the interpreter succeeded in having the situation understood. Mr. Nicollet had put among our provisions some Swiss cheese, and to give flavor to the soup a liberal portion of this had been put into the kettles. Until this strange flavor was accounted for the Indians thought they were being poisoned; but, the cheese being shown to them and explanations made, confidence was restored; and by the aid of several kettles of water well sweetened with molasses, and such other tempting delicatessen as could be provided from our stores, the dinner party went on and terminated in great good humor and general satisfaction.

Frémont was an alert observer of the Indian "surround" the following day. This was a grand slaughter of fat buffalo cows, whose meat was cut into long strips and draped over low scaffolds all about the encampment to be dried in the sun. Feasting

¹⁹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 48.

and dancing were prolonged throughout the night. A few days later he was equally interested in observing at Devil's Lake traces of a large hunting-camp of the Bois Brulés or half-breeds of the Red River of the North. The ashes of camp-fires, the deeply trodden ground and trails, and the ruts cut by heavily laden carts, showed that the great annual hunt had been successful. These *métis*, descendants of French, English, and Scotch, crossed with Chippewa, Sioux, and other tribes, now numbering six to eight hundred people, came down twice a year from Canada, where the buffalo were steadily growing scarcer. Each family had its yoke of oxen and a cart made to hold the meat of ten buffalo; each hunter had a fleet horse. By turns half of the hunters watched the camp, the other half pursued the game, and the spoils were divided communally. Most of the meat was made into pemmican; that is, dried by sun or fire, pounded into a coarse fibrous mass, mixed with melted fat, and packed into skin sacks. It was of two grades, the coarse pemmican of commerce, and a finer compound consisting of the choicest steaks carefully kneaded up with the marrow. The *gens libres*, as the half-breeds called themselves, were a picturesque race, living on the sale of pelts, buffalo-tongues, and pemmican, and so formidable with their rifles that the Indians were eager to make them allies.

After a nine-day survey about most of Devil's Lake, the expedition, tormented by mosquitoes, turned southeast across the Dakota plateau toward the basin of the Red River. On August 11th they crossed the dividing line between the Sheyenne and the Red at a height of about fifteen hundred feet; and soon afterward they came out on a small knoll commanding a magnificent view. Before them lay the far-stretching valley of the latter river, the green woods along its margin extending north toward the Canadian line and losing themselves southward in the summer haze. Even the scout Dixon was ecstatic over this landscape. Moving south, they explored the headwaters of several tributaries, Frémont making sketches and helping determine positions. Then they descended again to the

valley of the Sheyenne; traversed the beautiful lake region of western Minnesota; and coming down to the lower prairies, pursued their march to the trading-post at Lac qui Parle, where the Renvilles once more greeted them with open arms. Here they lingered, examining Big Stone and other lakes, making observations for Nicollet's map, and going on short excursions with the Renvilles, until the fall was far advanced.

Forever afterward, Frémont remembered the rare beauty of the prairies as the gradual northern autumn came on, turning the aspen leaves to gold and the cottonwoods to silver, and brightening the far-spreading plain with clumps of sere buffalo grass and vari-colored flowers. The lowlands near the Renville post were sprinkled with purple asters and ablaze with golden-rod, for that year the prairie flowers were exceptionally luxuriant. On clear days the azure sky merged imperceptibly with the remote horizon, and distant objects trembled and loomed till their size could hardly be judged; in the warmth of Indian Summer smoke veiled the far-off swells, and gossamer drove before the breeze. Finally the expedition, still making observations,²⁰ descended the Minnesota and Mississippi; and early in November Frémont, paddling down the latter stream with a detachment of the party, landed at Prairie du Chien. Here he received an important lesson upon the necessity, in exploration or any other enterprise, of seizing time by the forelock:

A steamboat at the landing was firing up and just about starting for St. Louis, but we thought it would be pleasant to rest a day or two and enjoy comfortable quarters while waiting for the next boat. But the next boat was in the spring, for next morning it was snowing hard, and the river was frozen from bank to bank. I had time enough while there to learn two things: one, how to skate; the other, the value of a day.²¹

²⁰ Nicollet was the first to use the barometer in obtaining altitudes of the interior, and he was tireless in making his skilful observations for latitude and longitude; F. S. Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 14.

²¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 53, 54.

A second phase of Frémont's apprenticeship to exploration had now been completed. He had become acquainted with a great region of the ill-known Northwest; he had learned comradeship with scouts, voyageurs, fur-traders, frontier soldiers, and Indians; he had mastered the art of camp-management; he had been taught woodcraft and prairie-craft by Sibley, Renville, Provôt, Dixon, and Frenière. He knew how to find water and firewood where both were scarce, to conciliate Indians, to deal with buffalo, prairie fires, and camp emergencies. Above all, Nicollet and Preuss had taught him how to make an expedition into a new country scientifically profitable—to take accurate astronomical observations at every halt, record topography, observe botany, soils, and minerals, and draught careful sketch-maps. Possessed by his passion for science, Nicollet tasked himself to exhaustion, as Sibley noted, and at times made the lieutenant work equally hard. Frémont still lacked discipline and still showed his abiding defects of judgment. He delighted in reckless feats of hardihood. In his *Memoirs* he relates how at Red Pipestone Quarry he leaped from the bluff to the top of a detached pedestal about twenty-five feet high—"quite a feat . . . as the top was barely a foot square and uneven, and it required a sure foot not to go farther"; how soon after leaving Fort Pierre he got completely lost on the prairies while pursuing a buffalo—a position of considerable peril, from which Frenière's good judgment in pursuit saved him. These weaknesses he was never to conquer. But he had been drilled in the best possible school for exploration, and his quick mind, ardent temperament, and zest for outdoor life had made the most of his tuition. Above all, he had found himself; he had embraced a calling in which he took, as he wrote later,²² "the true Greek joy in existence, in the gladness of living," and which was to make him famous.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 602.

IV

Washington Courtship

FRÉMONT returned to Washington the possessor of a certain dignity, even a certain reputation; to less fortunate officers he could talk with a casual air of what he had seen beyond the Mississippi, while he knew that the engineering branch of the army regarded him as a young man of promise. As we have noted, scientific information upon the wide region which they had crossed had been almost totally lacking. Nicollet now brought back a mass of careful data which far transcended in value the notes of Major Long's rapid exploration of the Minnesota and Red rivers, and Featherstonhaugh's superficial reconnaissance of the Coteau des Prairies; and he wished Frémont's aid in working it up. He took the lieutenant to call on the President and Secretary Poinsett. We can easily imagine the young explorer, erect, tanned, with his sharp, intense eyes, clear-cut features, and quick movements, shaking hands with the genial Van Buren, and interjecting an occasional word as Nicollet described their work. The President was appreciative. Nicollet took pains to impress upon Poinsett the fact that his aide had acquitted himself brilliantly; and, writes Frémont, "his kind reception and approval were to me the culminating pleasure" of the expedition.¹

Physically exhausted, Nicollet required some time to recuperate, and took Frémont to Baltimore for a pleasant vacation. Friends there, particularly the higher officers of the Catholic hierarchy, gave them a cordial welcome, and they were deluged with invitations. Their quarters were at the Sulpician seminary, St. Mary's College, where comfortable rooms were always ready

¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 55.

for Nicollet, and where the president, J. M. J. Chanché, made them at home. Nicollet showed his assistant, who for months had seen him in rough frontier garb, a wardrobe full of fine linen and other sartorial luxuries. They had long talks with Chanché, a fine-looking, courtly, cultivated man, soon to become Bishop of Natchez, and with other churchmen; men of elevated, secluded lives, obviously marked by learning and generous aims. The two dined at some of the best Baltimore homes, and thoroughly enjoyed their return to civilization. Frémont's vacation was cut short by the death of his brother in South Carolina, and he obtained leave to visit Charleston to comfort his aged mother. "I was happy for her sake," he writes, "in the unusual brightness my presence brought with it; for awhile it was almost the old time again." Then he rejoined Nicollet in Washington.

He now had an opportunity to observe the capital and its society under pleasanter conditions than before. Washington was still far more of a southern country town than a national center. Only one of the broad streets, Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and Capitol, had been paved; the others were deep with mud in winter, and poured out choking clouds of dust in hot weather. Houses and shops were scattered at wide intervals over the open lots, "like the teeth of some superannuated crone."² Many streets, avenues, and circles were defined by one or two dwellings standing alone in a waste of clay. Hills and valleys had not been touched, and their irregular levels were to remain until a generation later Boss Shepherd smoothed them away. Harriet Martineau had recently written that the town showed nothing but "a few mean houses dotted about, the sheds of the navy yard on one bank of the Potomac, and three or four villas on the other."³ A few really fine mansions clustered about Capitol Hill; the section about the White House—"the Co't End"—boasted a considerable group of others. But west of the White House little was to be

² Nathan Sargent, *Public Men and Events*, I, p. 54.

³ *Retrospect of Western Travel*, I, p. 160.

seen but pastures and ill-fenced fields, while east of the Capitol lay a series of quagmires, sending up miasmatic fogs at night; and all efforts to build a respectable city between the two had thus far failed.

Frémont and Nicollet were able to make fortunate arrangements for living and working. For years a close friendship had subsisted between Nicollet and the head of the Coast Survey, Ferdinand R. Hassler, a scientist of Swiss birth now seventy years of age. Since Hassler's duties took him into the field much of the time, and his children were grown, he was glad to open his house to the two men. It was conveniently placed on the slopes of Capitol Hill overlooking the Potomac, not far from the Coast Survey building. Partly in a large room here, partly in the Survey building itself, the map-work for the years of exploration was done. For considerable periods Hassler, a remarkable personality, would be with the two men. Coming to the United States in 1805 with a thorough mathematical training and large library, he had soon lost much of his money in an ill-managed land-colonization scheme, but had made influential friends. One was Jefferson, "whose kind expressions towards me, and interest for me," he wrote in 1828, "have until his death been my greatest satisfaction in this country."⁴ After teaching mathematics at West Point and in Union College, he had been sent abroad to procure instruments for the recently authorized Coast Survey, and after the War of 1812 became its head for two years. Jackson made him Superintendent of Weights and Measures, and on the revival of the Coast Survey in 1832 he was made its chief again. The country had no riper scientist, and there was no better geodetic surveyor in the world.

It was still another stroke of fortune for Frémont that he was brought into such close association with Hassler. He had much to learn from him in scientific method, and all his later work bore the impress of this training. Whenever Nicollet and Hassler debated some question of mathematics, topography, or mensuration, and this was often, the lieutenant was an eager

⁴ Hassler Papers, New York Public Library.

listener. Both were steeped in scientific lore and thoroughly congenial, but so different in temperament—Hassler abrupt, intolerant of pretence, impatient of obstruction, and sharp-tongued, and Nicollet urbane but intense—that clashes were frequent; “the one flint and the other steel, fire flashing out in every argument,” writes Frémont. Hassler had many peculiarities. It was not without cause that his wife, after bearing nine children, had deserted him. Thin, tall, and intellectual looking, dressing in summer in white flannels, he used to drive through the streets in what he called his “ark.” This was a huge comfortable carriage which he used in his field surveys, packing it with bedding, choice foods, and the best Rhine wines. Nicollet was tactful in his devotion to science, Hassler headlong and imperious. He did what he thought was scientifically right in the shortest way, and paid no attention to outside criticism. To a Congressman who reproached him for tardiness with a report, remarking that when he had such a paper to write he did it overnight, Hassler retorted: “That is time enough for such reports, but before you could write one of mine your days would be numbered.” Yet at heart, as Frémont soon found, he was a kindly man.⁵

Nicollet built an observatory on top of Hassler’s house, where the three made frequent night observations. Sometimes they were aided by J. J. Abert, head of the Topographical Corps, who liked to drop in. The work was confining, and at moments Nicollet and Frémont longed heartily for the open. The former wrote Sibley in the spring of 1840 that all their regards were perpetually turned toward the west, that all their conversations were on frontier scenes and friends.⁶ “If we take a promenade our recollections haunt us—the sight of a fine hunting dog, a double-barrelled gun, the sound of the wild cry of the geese which emigrate from North to South, all this for us seems to come from Sibley! . . . Frémont says to me every now and then,

⁵ See Hassler Papers, New York Public Library; Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 15; Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 56ff.; *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁶ Sibley Papers, quoted in Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, I, pp. 125, 126.

'Let us go and see Sibley. When will we go and see Sibley?'" But they made steady progress, save when Nicollet's growing weakness interrupted them. He wrote Hassler on September 20, 1840:⁷ "Nothing new in your establishment, where everything proceeds with the same order, tranquillity, and exactitude as under your direction. . . . Frémont and I have had eleven good series of astronomical observations this week. I am applying myself completely to my map, having finished the calculations which it demands. In eight or ten days there will be nothing more to introduce but the topographical details." A little later, unfortunately, he sent Hassler disquieting news: "That languor which troubled me sometimes during the summer seems to resolve itself now into an affection of the chest." And on New Year's Day, 1841, he wrote sadly that he had been confined to his room for more than a month, spending half of that period in bed, and that he was deeply depressed.

When Hassler was at home and Nicollet was well, the three led a pleasant social life. Hassler had a competent French chef, a mark of distinction; his cuisine was excellent, the house was admirably furnished, and he did a good deal of entertaining. In this city of thirty thousand people, every one of importance soon knew everybody else, and Frémont, introduced by two eminent scientists, had the entrée to the best homes. He saw or cared little for the purely political circles. Many Congressmen, living in hotels or boarding-houses, formed "messes," each group having a table to itself and making its own arrangement with a landlord or landlady for food. But he became a familiar figure at receptions and balls, some of which were rather glittering affairs with distinguished visitors from other cities and Europe. Among the more imposing mansions were John Tayloe's exquisite "octagon house," designed by Thornton, and John Van Ness's house, which Latrobe had erected at a cost of \$60,000. On Lafayette Square just across from the White House the venerable Dolly Madison, conspicuous for her old-fashioned gowns, snowy turban, and dignified manners, held court. Poin-

⁷ Hassler Papers, New York Public Library.

sett had a hospitable ménage, where Frémont was always welcome, and the wives of other Secretaries entertained frequently. At the dances, lasting until three in the morning and drawing rather more elderly people than young men, Frémont was in demand for his vivacity, his handsome if dapper figure, and his ability to talk about South American ports and western wigwams. Doubtless he liked these diversions. They broke in agreeably upon the long days spent in careful calculations, the long night watches in the observatory. He was a light-hearted young fellow, and in his *Memoirs* tells some stories of pranks that half-pleased, half-irritated Nicollet.

Inevitably the introductions which Poinsett and Nicollet gave him, the social round into which he was drawn, brought him friends who were to prove of lasting importance. Two in particular were to exert a powerful influence on his behalf. Though the summer and fall of 1840 found the country in the throes of the log-cabin campaign, some men were interested in larger issues than Whig or Democratic victory. With population fast spreading into the West, many had their eyes upon Texas, the Mexican possessions north and west of it, and Oregon. The junior Senator from Missouri, Lewis F. Linn, was one. Born of Kentucky pioneer stock, and long a frontier physician at Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, he had entered the Senate seven years earlier as a devoted Jacksonian and an enthusiastic believer in manifest destiny. During Van Buren's Administration he became a leader in the revival of sentiment at Washington for "saving" Oregon from the British—it then being held jointly by the two powers. After introducing in 1838 a bill to "re-occupy" the territory and establish a government there under military protection, he continued to urge legislation for its occupation and settlement. Not at all a fire-eater, indeed a mild, amiable, and much-beloved man, he believed that Americans must press rapidly to the Pacific. Far more influential than Linn was the senior Senator from Missouri, Thomas Hart Benton. He, too, supported by the economic interests of his state, believed whole-heartedly in western expansion. Though he held

that the Texas question had been settled by the treaty of 1819 and that our absorption of that area was unwarranted, though his views on British rights in Oregon were so mild that he became a strong adherent of the compromise line of 49°, he wished to see the American flag carried all the way from San Juan to Lower California.⁸ His dynamic personality, persistence, and reputation as Democratic floor-leader in the Senate, made him a powerful figure.

Frémont made speedy acquaintance with these men. Benton lived on C Street amid an interesting circle of friends.⁹ He and Poinsett had long been acquainted—Poinsett had in fact urged his appointment as Minister to Mexico before taking the place himself; and of late years Poinsett as head of the War Department had transacted much business with Benton as chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee. Soon after Frémont came back from the Northwest he met Benton at the Secretary's home, and the two immediately found much in common. Benton's belief in the rich possibilities of the West, and his earnest desire to see all the country to the Oregon coast explored, protected, and colonized as promptly as possible, led him to call frequently at the Coast Survey to study Nicollet's map. While Nicollet dilated on the fertility of the Minnesota-Dakota country, Frémont described the topographical details. He found Benton somewhat disappointed by the slowness of the map-making, and had to explain that it was an exacting process. First observations had to be taken in the field; then with astronomical aids they had to be reduced to latitude and longitude; then the map had to be projected and the positions as fixed by observation laid down upon it; then from the sketch-books the lines of the rivers, forms of lakes, and contours had to be inserted.¹⁰ As Benton watched the map grow he asked many questions.

⁸ William M. Meigs, *Life of Thomas Hart Benton*, pp. 276ff., 339ff.

⁹ *Memoirs of John A. Dix*, I, p. 249.

¹⁰ Frémont prints in his *Memoirs*, pp. 45, 46, a letter by an engineer of the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad, C. W. Irish, who in 1879-80 made observations for altitude along much of Frémont's route in Minnesota and Dakota, and found his records accurate within a few feet.

In return for Frémont's information the Senator, always ready to expound his vision of western development, dwelt upon the opportunities for exploration beyond the Missouri. This wild region, known only by the disjointed reports of a few travelers, offered much the same challenge to scientific exploration as Central Africa a few decades later. It should be traversed, mapped, and made known to the American people, declared Benton. Moreover, roads should be opened through it and settlement encouraged. He wished to see the Columbia River Valley occupied by emigrants, and the American title to its rich lands fully established.

Benton had to be taken seriously, for he was the principal floor-leader of the Van Buren Administration in the Senate, and despite his eccentricities, a respected statesman who represented much of American opinion. Those observers did him wrong who regarded him as an opinionated, tiresome, humorless crank on western expansion and other questions. He was thoroughly sincere, courageous, capable of great intellectual detachment, and on many points surprisingly moderate—on slavery, for example, as well as the boundary issues. To be sure, when he rose the Senate chamber emptied and gallery visitors filed out to avoid his interminable speech. To be sure, he was pompous, vain, and in some ways arrogant, and extraordinary stories could be told to illustrate his self-esteem. When Appletons inquired what sale his *Thirty Years' View* might be expected to have, he replied with crushing dignity: "Sir, I believe that the census states how many families there are in the United States." Complimented upon the striking impression he had made by a stump speech, he answered: "Always the fact, sir—always the fact." He once assured the Senate that small boys playing in the remoter parts of the republic learned year by year the story of his achievements, and found in them an irresistible incitement to ambition and public service. But unlike some other humorless and vain leaders, such as Charles Sumner, he had a sense of proportion and was essentially likeable.

It was a stormy age; he carried some of his political con-

victions into personal intercourse, and repeatedly was hardly on speaking terms with such Whig opponents as Webster and Clay. Stiff-necked and self-confident, he never surrendered one of his deliberate positions. He had proved his staying-power in his long fight to expunge from the journals of the Senate Clay's resolution censuring President Jackson. Yet the dogmatic, imperious Senator possessed qualities that his foes admired. He had assiduous scholarship, breadth of view, and a high sense of civic responsibility. A Southerner and slaveholder, he held Jefferson's conviction that slavery was a pernicious institution and always opposed its spread to new lands. Though a devoted expansionist he adhered strictly to principle; the annexation of Texas offended him, as did the warlike cry of "Fifty-four forty or fight" in the Oregon controversy. He was a true democrat in favoring the grant of free homesteads of 160 acres to all bona fide settlers. As his biographer, Roosevelt, has said, he was morally as far superior to Webster as intellectually he was inferior. His public career and personal life was alike unsullied. Austere, of imposing dignity, loyal to his friends but never encouraging intimacy, he showed a dignity and polish that were refreshing in this era of Jacksonian informality and conviviality.

Frémont quickly recognized the statesmanlike vision of Benton, and soon realized also that the Senator was remarkably well versed in geography and travel. Though he had never been far beyond the Mississippi, he devoured every book and article upon western exploration, and took pains to talk with every man who penetrated into unknown regions. Upon these subjects he was pronounced a better authority than any reference library.¹¹ Frémont's imagination was profoundly stirred by his very first interview with the Senator. Up to this moment the lieutenant had fixed all his ambitions upon engineering, and tells us that he had made the lives of great engineers his "treasured exemplars." Now he saw opening before him the possibility of extending to the remoter West the type of work which he and Nicollet had been performing in the Minnesota-Dakota coun-

¹¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Life of Thomas Hart Benton*, p. 36.

try; of pinning his name to the western map, and grasping fame as the pathmarker of the great plains and the mountains. In this undertaking there would be adventure, activity, scope for all his energies and ambitions, and perhaps fortune. "This interview with Mr. Benton," he exclaimed later of their first long talk, "was pregnant with results and decisive of my life."

Fired by his new aims, he began spending more and more time at Benton's house, until his acquaintancy grew into intimacy. Here, Congress being in session, he met many western members, whose talk fell often upon exploration and expansion. Among them was Augustus C. Dodge, at this time Delegate and later Senator from Iowa. Dodge was a tall man, powerfully built, with an imperious manner; he was a half-brother of Senator Linn. Senator Robinson of Illinois was often present, with others keenly interested in opening the Far West. Nicollet's health continued poor, and the energy and vivacity of the younger officer brought him into the foreground of attention at the very time that Benton and his colleagues began to make definite plans for an exploring expedition beyond the Missouri.¹²

The Benton family at this time consisted of four daughters and one son, and Frémont caught glimpses of an affectionate but disciplined home life which seemed very attractive to him. He learned of the Senator's rigorous habits of work: every morning Benton rose before six o'clock, curried himself, as he put it, with some stiff brushes, and sat down in his dressing-gown of white flannel to his writing. For light, he depended upon an ingenious candelabrum of his own invention, with four spermaceti candles fastened in front of a large square of white blotting paper as reflector.¹³ Mrs. Benton and he were devoted to one another. They insisted that the children should be carefully dressed for dinner, should be in the drawing-room before it was served at five, and should make the meal cheery and amusing. If any one brought a disagreeable topic to the table, the punish-

¹² Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 66.

¹³ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

ment was exclusion from the circle next day. When Frémont became familiar with the household, only three children, the two youngest daughters and the son Randolph, were at home, for Sarah (the oldest) and Jessie were at Miss English's boarding-school in Georgetown, three miles away. This was the most fashionable school anywhere near Washington, with a Danish lady for principal, more than a score of teachers, a hundred boarding pupils, and many day scholars. The roster included Fitzhughs, Calverts, and even a Washington. But the Benton daughters, reared in a simple, wholesome fashion, were not sent to it because it was fashionable. Sarah, in ailing health, needed a special regimen; both required good tuition; and the blooming Jessie was kept in the school partly to avoid suitors—for she had already received two direct proposals of marriage.

Frémont and Jessie first met at a school concert in Georgetown, to which he escorted the eldest sister. The result was love at first sight, or almost that. She was like a rose, like a beautiful picture, he exclaimed many years later. Jessie was not quite sixteen, but in the full bloom of girlish beauty, her perfect health effervescing in bright talk. Frémont, who had not seen many pretty girls since his long stay on the frontier, was in a susceptible mood. He was carried away by Jessie's brown hair and bright brown eyes, her lovely oval face and rich high-colored complexion, her sparkle and vivacity, which more than matched his own; her grasp of mind, her tenacious memory, and her quick perceptions, all inherited from her father. He perceived also in her a quality of imagination which the Senator never possessed. Indeed, Jessie was already known in the capital as a girl of rare character and brilliancy, who gave promise of a still rarer womanhood. For her part, she responded as quickly to Frémont's dash, energy, and impetuosity. Years later people recalled him as "the handsomest young man who ever walked the streets of Washington." She was naturally emotional and warm-hearted. Each perceived the other's feelings, and neither had the temperament for much restraint. "There

came a glow into my heart," Frémont wrote decades later,¹⁴ "which changed the current and color of daily life, and gave beauty to common things."

Months passed before Jessie, coming home for a vacation, was able to see the ardent lieutenant with any frequency. When she did return, his visits to the Benton home became more frequent than ever, and their object was not long in doubt. She was so transparent, her soul (as Frémont expressed it) was so white, that she was unable to conceal her girlish emotions. "At that time of awakening mind the qualities that made hers could only be seen in flitting shadows across her face, or in the expressions of incipient thought and unused and untried feeling." The Senator and Mrs. Benton became alarmed.

It was difficult to exclude an irreproachable and brilliant officer from the Benton home. By fixed custom friends and neighbors were always welcome to the evening circle in the drawing-room upstairs. Here, if the weather were chilly, a bright fire snapped on the hearth. On one side of the fireplace the Senator had a large table with his evening mail and the book he was then reading, its pages illuminated by his ingenious candelabrum or an astral lamp. On the other side Mrs. Benton sat placidly at a smaller table, her hands busy with knitting or embroidery. The four sisters had a great heavy square desk with shaded lamp, work-baskets, and portfolio; and as they were good musicians, if any guest requested it one would play, and Jessie and another, who had a beautiful contralto voice, would sing. In these surroundings the courtship was carried on, and it progressed so rapidly that the parents finally intervened. While they liked and admired Frémont, he was very poor, his salary was meager, and army promotion was slow. As yet his future seemed far from bright. Jessie's parents lectured her, while the Senator intimated to the lieutenant that she was far too young to think of marriage, and that when she did, they hoped she would not be subjected to the unsettled existence of an army

¹⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 67.

officer's wife. By the winter of 1840-41, it was understood that Frémont was not to see Jessie except on rare occasions.

But the attachment was too ardent to be halted, and within a short time ripened into a definite engagement. By a strange contrast of scenes, this bright event in the young people's lives occurred on President Harrison's funeral day, just a month after his festal inauguration. Since the Benton windows did not command a view of the funeral assemblage, Frémont asked Jessie, her grandmother, and a few friends to watch it from Hassler's house, which stood at the foot of Capitol Hill and offered a complete view of the procession as it defiled up to the east front of the Capitol. The large workroom was selected for the party, the desks were removed to another floor, and the place was made attractive by potted flowers and nosegays. A cheerful fire which had been kindled on the hearth, for it was a chill gray day outside, threw its gleam over a pretty tea-table, laden with cakes, French sweets, and ices. The grandmother was the guest of honor, and ostensibly all the flowers and delicacies were for her. While the elders of the group were troubled by the expense to which this "poor army man" had gone in entertaining them, Frémont, exalted and happy, was everywhere ministering to his guests' comfort. Without regard for his best uniform, he brought in logs and kept the fire blazing; he served the tea and ices with his own hands. Outside echoed the tramp of a great and mournful crowd in the raw cold of early April and the wailing of dirges as the plumed hearse carried Harrison's body, drawn by six white horses, to the Congressional Cemetery. Inside, as Jessie later wrote, was "our friendly group excited and amused (and two entirely content.)"¹⁵ While the others were intent upon the funeral procession, these two had decisively plighted their troth.

The happiness of the pair was all too evident, and when next day Frémont sent all the geraniums and roses to Jessie's mother with a graceful message, she and the Senator decided that the situation had become perilous. They laid a shrewd plan. Mrs.

¹⁵ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, pp. 37, 38.

Benton knew Mrs. Poinsett well, and going to her, frankly stated the case: Jessie's extreme youth, Frémont's poverty, and the need for a separation. The Poinsetts agreed, and Frémont was astonished by orders suddenly detaching him from his duty of map-making, and directing him to proceed at once to make a survey of the Des Moines River in Iowa Territory, the stream along which the Sauk and Fox dwelt. The ailing Nicolle protested that he could ill spare his most efficient and experienced aide, but in vain. "*Il y a quelque diablerie là-dedans,*" the French scientist ejaculated, shaking his head, and Frémont hurriedly set off by stage-coach. To be given charge of this reconnaissance was a promotion, but he went reluctantly. Jessie mourned his departure for a few days, and then she too was caught up and taken south to Lexington, Virginia, where a great wedding in her mother's family, the McDowells, with thirty-five house-guests, was about to occur.¹⁶ The lovers were not left without hopes. There had been an agreement, at least informal and tacit, between them and Jessie's parents, that their engagement was to have a year's probation, and that at the end of that period they might, if their minds were unchanged, be married.

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 40ff., for an animated description of this wedding.

V

A Runaway Marriage

FRÉMONT'S survey of the Des Moines River was by no means unimportant. Nicollet and he during their northern expedition had covered part of its headwaters; and now Secretary Poinsett declared that its course should be carefully plotted to its mouth in order to make their map of the Mississippi-Missouri system more nearly complete. Ordinarily Nicollet would not have been reluctant, but he was in bad health, and needed Frémont's daily help. Another assistant had to be found, and in his report he indicates how indispensable was the aid of both: ¹

The elements of the celestial bodies observed, as they were needed for the calculation, were taken from the *Nautical Almanac*: and the calculation of this considerable mass of astronomical observations has been executed by Lieut. Frémont and myself, aided for three months by Lieut. E. P. Scammon, corps of topographical engineers, whose zeal and intelligence on this occasion, as well as the talent with which he had assisted Lieut. Frémont in the construction of the map, insures my gratitude.

The map dragged badly after Frémont left. The young man, however, enjoyed at twenty-eight an opportunity to shoulder an independent responsibility of importance.

Since settlement was pressing rapidly into the Des Moines region, an accurate topographical survey and map would be of material value. Already Iowa Territory, which included that part of Minnesota lying west of the Mississippi, had about 45,000 people. For the most part they clung rather closely to the Mississippi. The Des Moines, flowing into the larger stream

¹ Nicollet, *Report*, p. 106.

near Keokuk, and draining a great part of central and southern Iowa, was still almost wholly wild. But within about two years Ottumwa was to be established on its banks, and Fort Des Moines, on the site of the city of that name, was to be built to protect the Sauk and Fox from white encroachments.

Frémont was expected to complete his task within six months. Proceeding to St. Louis, he enlisted the aid of Pierre Chouteau, hired his old companion the botanist Geyer at \$1,500 a year to accompany him, and set off up the river. The party included several voyageurs who had been with the Nicollet expedition. Though their exploration was confined to the immediate valley of the river, they frequently ranged back into the woods, abounding with deer and wild turkey. It was an enjoyable and health-giving summer, but as Frémont drily records, it did not cure his special ailment.

A letter of Nicollet's, which illustrates the affection between them, shows plainly what was uppermost in Frémont's mind—what questions Nicollet was expected to answer.² Dated in Washington July 11, 1841, it answered a note which Frémont had sent from St. Louis on June 23rd, just as he was setting out northward. "I assure you," wrote Nicollet, "that our separation gives me as much pain here as it did to you in St. Louis." He was pleased to learn that all Frémont's preparations had gone smoothly and that Geyer was with him. "You had hardly left Baltimore when the idea occurred to me, and I should have written to St. Louis to suggest it had I not believed that M. Geyer was probably otherwise engaged and would not be able to accept your offer." Estimating the date of Frémont's arrival at the forks of the Raccoon and Des Moines, Nicollet found that he would not have the aid of the moon, at least before midnight, in making his calculations; but, he added, he could base them partly on the sun. To aid poor Geyer in some money difficulties with his St. Louis landlord, he had sent \$100 through Pierre Chouteau, with instructions to keep the identity of the donor secret.

² Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

Everything in the Washington office, Nicollet went on, was going well; they were working hard, and were in harmonious relations with their superiors. After spending almost a month carefully revising the map, they had written all the notes which accompanied it: "there remains only your work upon the Des Moines, and to finish the topography." He had been pleased to find that there was nothing to change "in your admirable Missouri"—that is, in Frémont's map of the stream. Only two small errors in plotting, and two in calculations, had been found. Nicollet included various messages to friends in St. Louis, and asked that Geyer be reminded to make a search for fossils in the vicinity of the city. "I shall await you," he concluded, "with open arms to embrace you and congratulate you." All this we can imagine Frémont reading with interest; but the passage which he must have devoured again and again occurred in the middle of the letter:

Everyone here and in Baltimore inquires after you; even the Benton household, every time I go there. The young girls returned home evening before last, ten days later than they were expected, on account of the grandmother, who died at the moment when they were about to set out on their journey to Washington. *Everything is going well; she is quite happy, and she is impatient to see you.*

If Jessie's parents had expected her to change her mind during Frémont's six months' absence, they knew less about their daughter than they should have done. Strength of will and constancy of purpose, a tenacity like her own father's, were among her salient characteristics. Benton had waited seven years after his first rejection to marry her mother. As a young girl, Elizabeth McDowell, who sprang from a proud Virginia family—a brother became governor of the State—had said that she would never marry a redhaired man, a Democrat, or an army man, but her redhaired, Democratic, and military suitor would not take a refusal. Now Jessie's purpose was equally fixed, her will equally firm.³

³ Jessie's traits are well described in Catherine Coffin Phillips, *Jessie Benton Frémont*, Chs. 3 and 4.

Nor, though still less than seventeen and a half years old, was she unfit for the duties of wifehood. Maturing early, she was gifted with womanly qualities and abounding energy. The oldest Benton daughter was delicate; but I, she writes, "was a perfectly healthy child. I don't remember a headache until I was twenty-three; gay-hearted, affectionate, with a keen delight in life, and that *besoin d'aimer* that made loving and being loved necessary to me." Her education had been remarkably complete and wholesome. From her earliest years she had been a companion, and from young girlhood an aide, to her father. She wrote long afterward: "I think I came into my father's life like a breath of his own compelling nature; strong, resolute, but open to all tender and gracious influences." She recalled how once, when she was three, the Senator found her sprawled on the floor of the library, covering the sheets of his latest speech with red and blue chalk marks. He asked angrily, "Who did this?" Jessie instantly planted herself in front of him, and with a disarming smile found the weakest joint of his armor by saying: "It's a little girl that cries, 'Hurrah for Jackson!'" From the time she learned to read she profited by Benton's earnest mind and wealth of learning. The family had a large collection of books, and her taste matured early. She was attracted at once to Shakespeare, and "to the British state trials; huge folios I came to know well through the full-page illustrations before I could read."⁴

She had the advantage also, one of great importance to the future wife of an explorer, of acquaintance with widely different scenes and circles; from her earliest years she was accustomed to the movement, life, and variety that she loved to the end. During her girlhood the Bentons possessed three homes. That in Washington was the official residence. That in St. Louis, which the difficulties of travel made it impossible to reach except in the alternate years of the short Congressional session, boasted wide grounds, handsome trees and shrubbery,

⁴ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, *passim*; see also her biographical sketch of Benton in Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, pp. 1-17.

and a gay social life among the Americans and Franco-Americans of the city. But the home which Jessie loved best was her Grandfather McDowell's extensive estate at Lexington in the beautiful Shenandoah. She had connections with some of the best families of the Old Dominion. Her father was descended from one of the colonial governors, Sir William Gooch, her mother from the Prestons; and when as a child she traveled down from Washington, to be met at Fredericksburg by her grandfather's carriage, she stopped every night from there to Lexington at some friendly mansion of importance.

She associated this ancestral estate with picnics in its large park, with hunting, with gay masquerade parties, with Negro mammies and uncles, and with a joyous outdoor life. Here she would follow her father up some ravine as he shot quail, and eat lunch with him under a tree. Resting against his shoulder in the southern sun, the wind stirring her hair, she would listen while he read aloud an English poet, a French translation of Homer, or the *Arabian Nights*. On the long western trips by stage and steamboat, she delighted in the scenery of the National Road or the Ohio; and St. Louis, a genial half-southern, half-western town, with the teeming activity of the mighty river rolling past, was always dear to her. In spring the town, full of blossoming locusts and catalpas, seemed en fête, every one happy and gay; and her father, freed from official routine, gave himself up to outdoor life. Settee, table, and a colony of chairs were taken to the long gallery on the ground floor, where all his friends were welcome to an early breakfast of fruit, hot-breads, and coffee.

This varied training fed Jessie's natural vivacity and interest in all kinds of people, and deepened the social charm which made her so captivating. Her ancestry was purely British. Her visits to the Virginia estate, her father's tastes in literature and law, made her familiar with the best Anglo-American tradition. Yet from infancy she was also imbued (and this was an essential contribution to the perfect understanding between her and Frémont) with the spirit of Franco-American life in

the Southwest. Even in Washington she was given French as well as English governesses. In St. Louis, the family had many French neighbors who called informally and took a warm interest in the children. One of the Senator's closest friends was a Spanish gentleman who had served with Wellington in Spain, and another a Colonel Garnier who had fought under Napoleon and talked of his experiences at great length.

Benton always insisted that his children assimilate knowledge, not acquire it parrot-wise. To Jessie's delight, therefore, in St. Louis she was first sent to an undisciplined but effective school for practise in French with other children. Her mother's stiff, taciturn maid Sara conducted her and her sisters for the pleasant walk of a mile, drilling them in their "manners." When they passed Mme. Desirée, the clear-starcher, Sara instructed them to speak with special politeness, for she was a poor workingwoman and brusqueness might hurt her feelings. The house-doors of various ladies, Mme. Auguste, Mme. Pierre, Mme. Jean, would be open, and they would call the children into their large inner courtyards, pet them, and give them some fruit or other gift. When at last the promenade ended, the youngsters would be put not at formal lessons, but to whipping ruffles or hemming handkerchiefs in the garden of Mme. Savary's school, overlooking the wide tawny river below the bluff; practising their French all the while. Later came a more rigorous tuition in the convent of the Sacré Cœur. It was no ordinary convent school. It had a staff of accomplished teachers, models of French breeding and refinement, who taught Jessie not merely history and literature but a *savoir faire* which she could never have acquired so well elsewhere.

Yet *savoir faire* came naturally to the daughter of Senator Benton, who saw so much of the best society of the country in Washington. She was frequently at the White House, for as a little girl she became a favorite of President Jackson's. She remembered sitting on his knee as he and the Senator chatted. She recalled such experiences as a tour of the White House a few minutes before a state dinner: the long silent rooms bright

with candles, the enormous table gleaming with silver, linen, and banked smilax, and at each end of its oval expanse a great salmon, half-buried in rippling waves of meat-jelly. She was a bridesmaid at the famous wedding of the Russian Minister, Count Bodisco, to one of her schoolmates at Georgetown, a wedding extraordinary for the disparity of age—the ugly, kindly count being sixty-one and the blooming bride sixteen—and for the distinction of the guests. President Van Buren was there: Henry Clay, tall and slender in his black coat, gave the bride away; and the groomsman paired with Jessie was the handsome Senator, James Buchanan, who sixteen years later was to contest the presidency with her husband.⁵ In spite of all predictions, it proved a happy marriage. At her father's house, Jessie became familiar with all the Democratic leaders of the day. But society, however interesting, never quite won her away from books:⁶

The supreme delight for me was to be found in Washington only, for there was the Congressional library. While reading was still a little difficult, the books of glorious pictures were mine to pasture in: Audubon's birds, the Louvre Gallery, fine French engravings of many others. Many a noble collection of sculptures and paintings were all freely laid before me on their broad, low rests, where I, sitting entranced, took in visions of art and beauty that must have moulded my thought and life. My father would take me when he walked to the Senate at ten, leave me to the care of kind Mr. Meehan, the librarian, and at twelve our nurse came for me, often finding me on the broad recessed gallery opening from the center of the library, where I would find in the noble view of the Potomac and its opposite hills, historical Arlington chief, as lovely a picture as any in the books—plus color and life. This was a growing happiness. Year after year that hushed scholarly atmosphere entered into me. As a young girl I was (ex officio) on the purchasing committee of the Senate. My judgment would be asked, and often taken, for French works. Books costing hundreds were in this way open to me—and many others of little cost but great value.

⁵ Helen Nicolay, *Our Capital on the Potomac*, pp. 221-224.

⁶ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

We must think of Jessie at seventeen as a young woman already mature, with a training which had made the best of her naturally decisive character and strong mind. Far from being an unripe and wavering school-girl, whose romantic fancy for a young officer would leave her as quickly as it had come, she had a will of her own. She had seen much of the world, and knew men, cities, politics, and literature. Vivacious, keenly interested in life, quick to measure others, strong in her dislikes and still stronger in her likes, with a delightful combination of poise and animation, she felt that her choice had been fixed. The engagement made in the spring was not to be broken in the summer; it was to become marriage in the fall.

Frémont's work on the Des Moines was accomplished as quickly as impatience could desire. He established the course of the river upward from its mouth to the Racoon Forks, about two hundred miles in all; taking his astronomical observations with great care, giving Geyer time to make a botanical survey. He felt strongly the responsibility of the expedition, and its successful completion marked another stage in his development.⁷ We may be sure that he was proud to return to Washington with his data, supplementing Nicollet's own survey of the upper portions of the Des Moines, complete and in order.

Just when he was back in the capital we do not know—probably early in September. Nor do we know under just what circumstances he and Jessie met again. For a time he was busy completing the maps, for Nicollet's health was now at a low ebb. The map-making was the chief crown and goal of these expeditions, and had to be done with the greatest care. Altitudes had been determined by barometer; latitudes by deduction from a long series of astronomical observations of stars to the north and south of the zenith; longitudes by telescopic observation of the eclipses of the satellites of Jupiter, eclipses of the sun, occultations of the planets and fixed stars by the moon, and transits of the inferior planets over the sun's disc. All these calculations were difficult, and some of them exceedingly intri-

⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, uncorrected proof sheets, Bancroft Library.

cate.⁸ The reconnaissance or survey of the country traversed had been made by taking the magnetic bearing of every point, estimating its distance, and then making a sketch or bird's-eye view of the whole; this operation being constantly repeated as they moved forward. Even in Nicollet's first summer the sketching had been left to Frémont. The scientist reported to the government that

his coöperation during 1838 and 1839, while it left me more time to spend upon other duties, as the chief of the expedition, proved also otherwise advantageous, by the talents which he displayed for the branch of the service, and the activity and accuracy which have always characterized what he has had occasion to perform under my direction.

In the Des Moines expedition, Frémont was, of course, compelled to do all the work of ascertaining altitudes, latitudes, and longitudes as well as the lighter labor of sketching. It was always fascinating to him to see his maps approaching final form—to place on paper the results of laborious travel through the uncharted wilderness as a guide for future wayfarers.

The Bentons were still adamant in their opposition to the match. Sometimes Frémont saw Jessie at her parents' home, sometimes clandestinely. It was the dull season in Washington; as dull, wrote James Gordon Bennett,⁹ "as the last season philippics. Pennsylvania Avenue reminds one of the prophet Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. Hardly so much as a dun stirring." The two discussed their position carefully. If they waited for parental approval they might have to wait ten years, and they were far too impetuous, far too much in love, to face such a prospect. A runaway marriage, they decided, was the only means of securing their happiness. Frémont, with Jessie eagerly awaiting the result, went to several Protestant clergymen of Washington and asked them to perform the ceremony. By now

⁸ Nicollet, who had worked out carefully the best technics of determining altitudes, latitudes, and longitudes, and had taught them to Frémont, describes the processes in his *Report*, pp. 95-142.

⁹ New York *Herald*, November 10, 1841.

it was well known that Senator Benton was wrathfully opposed to the match, and the ministers answered that while they would be glad to marry the two openly, they would not officiate at a secret wedding. For one reason, Jessie was only seventeen years and five months old. We can imagine how her eyes flashed over this news. Frémont's Catholic friends in Baltimore would have been glad to come to his aid, but this was unnecessary. A friend of Jessie's, Mrs. J. J. Crittenden, wife of the Senator from Kentucky, who had watched the romance with warm interest, interceded for them with Father Van Horseigh of a Washington parish and he promised to perform the ceremony. On October 19, 1841, with the Crittenden family as witnesses, they were married in a parlor of Gadsby's Hotel, the two immediately parting.¹⁰ For some time they kept their secret from the Benton family, and we have a curious letter from one of Frémont's frontier associates, F.W. Gody, dated in Washington on November 7th, urging him to make a public announcement. Gody wrote Frémont: ¹¹

Your letter dated Baltimore I have received in due time, and would not have delayed my answer on this particular occasion for an hour if it had not been for breaking up my camp and leaving for Washington. I have arrived here on Friday morning, and now I hasten to offer you my best congratulations, and beg you to accept my most sincere wishes for your future happiness. Perhaps you have noticed, Mr. Frémont, that I am not very fond of much and big talk, but so much I can assure you, that none of your friends (you have permitted me to class myself amongst them) feel a warmer interest for you than I do, that no one wishes more truly and more cordially that those expectations of a blessed domestic happiness, which you naturally must have formed, may soon and continually be realized. I hope you will not think it too great a liberty, when I repeat the word "soon." Although, my dear Frémont, I cannot judge in this particular case clearly, yet I would venture to say,

¹⁰ New York *Tribune*, June 23, 1856. Another account states the ceremony was performed at the Crittenden home; C. C. Phillips, *Jessie Benton Frémont*, p. 57.

¹¹ Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

that any delay of an open declaration, which some time or another must follow, makes your excuse, as well as this declaration itself, much more difficult. Besides, the possibility of an accidental discovery is very strong— Why don't you go, manly and open as you are, forward and put things by a single step to right—never mind in what this step consists—only act now and you will soon get over little disturbances which might arise at first. Nothing very serious can happen now more to you—the prize is secured and the rest will soon be smoothed by help of time and mutual affection and love.

If I am mistaken in my suggestion it is for want of information, and then I beg to forgive me. It is friendship that makes me write so. Anyhow, I sympathize with you—and entertain no fears for a fortunate conclusion.

I arrived here on Friday morning, and am perfectly happy in the society of my lovely girl. I don't like it much you beat me so decidedly, but I hope now to follow soon, and then if I should go out in spring again, I will not have to leave her behind me. I had no time in Baltimore to call on you, besides I did not know your residence altho supposing it to be Bainims.

Mrs. Cummings and Mary desire to be remembered to you and I conclude with the assurance of friendship and personal esteem.

P.S. When walking last night with my Mary and Mrs. Cummings we met Mrs. Frémont. I had a glimpse at her, and thought she looked very well and happy.

Excuse all the blots, neither pen nor ink are good for anything.

Frémont had said that he did not care who performed the wedding ceremony, so long as it was performed quickly and surely. Early in November, visiting Nicollet in Baltimore, he was urged by his superior to disclose the marriage at once, but replied that Mrs. Frémont must decide the time. He in turn urged Jessie, and received a characteristic answer: "We will explain together. Come to the house tomorrow morning before ten o'clock. I shall ask for an early interview." Next morning the two entered the library together to tell their news to the grim-faced Senator. Frémont alternately paled and flushed, but Jessie defiantly placed her hand in his as he asked for a hearing. Years afterward she delighted to tell the story of the sequel

to her grandchildren. It was a story of the lieutenant stammering, embarrassed, but determined; of Benton blazing with anger; of his sharp commands—"Get out of the house and never cross my door again! Jessie shall stay here!"; and of her own dramatic and defiant intervention, as she clutched Frémont's arm tighter and silenced the Senator by the words of Ruth: "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God!"¹² Benton knew that she would be as good as her word, and he was not the man to drive his daughter from her home. In the end she stayed, and Frémont, leaving his boarding-house forever, came to stay with her.

¹² Mrs. Henry Hull (a granddaughter) gave me this information.

VI

The Stakes of the West

FRÉMONT, unfortunate (as we may have said) in his illegitimate birth, his poverty, and his undisciplined early schooling, had been fortunate in his later scientific training; and now he was fortunate most of all in the time and circumstances in which he began his greatest work. He had completed his apprenticeship to exploration, and had obtained by marriage the support of the American statesman most interested in mapping and colonizing the West, at the opening of the forties. The decade which followed was to be preëminently the decade of American expansion; the decade in which Texas and the Southwest, California and Oregon, were all added to the Union, and in which a flood of emigrants swept to the coast. For this expansion and emigration Frémont was to do spectacular service.

Before the western wilderness lying beyond the Missouri could be opened to the broad American advance—a land of mountain, plain, cañon, and forest regarding which the eastern public possessed little accurate knowledge—various preparatory labors had to be performed therein. The different types of men who accomplished them each deserve no small meed of gratitude. First the paths of this wilderness had to be found; the trails by which men could ford rivers, thread the mountains, traverse parched deserts, without needless danger. Indians and buffalo knew most of these paths, and the first white hunters and trappers absorbed and added to their lore: men like John Colter, who was with Lewis and Clark, who served the fur-trader Manuel Lisa, and who made a famous journey southwest from the Yellowstone and back again to

Lisa's Fort Raymond as early as 1807; like Jedediah Smith and Thomas Fitzpatrick, who marched westward through South Pass in 1824; like Etienne Provôt, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and Old Bill Williams.¹ These "mountain men" spied out the natural highways of the West before the pulse of emigration began to throb along the Missouri.

But not one, not even Kit Carson, knew the paths and trails completely for more than a limited region. Nor was any member of this rude, daring, semi-illiterate group capable, even in the areas he most frequently ranged, of mapping trail, pass, and waterway with precision. Though they were the true pathfinders, their knowledge was relatively useless, for it could not be diffused. An expedition which hired one or several as guides might find its way expertly through the Far West, but their physical presence was required, and they were elusive men. At any moment, a tomahawk might wipe out all the knowledge that one of them had laboriously gained. Indeed, early in the forties arrow and bullet did extinguish much of their lore. This stern breed of mountain-men has had prose celebrators like Stanley Vestal and minstrels like John G. Neihardt, and it deserves them. But the group could not do the sustained work requisite for linking the local trails and natural highways into three great sets of transcontinental routes for colonists—the southern, the central, and northern routes. Even had they been able to do this, they would have been helpless to diagram accurately, to capitulate, and to advertise the highways of the West. They could furnish many of the raw materials of geographical knowledge; Carson, Bridger, and Fitzpatrick in particular were gifted with the photographic mind, and could give *orally* a clear and definite picture of any district they had visited; but they could hardly do more.

A second, more varied, and equally heroic group was made

¹ Excellent biographies have been written of most of these men: E. L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*; J. Cecil Alter, *Jim Bridger, Trapper, Frontiersman, Scout, and Guide*; W. J. Ghent and Leroy Hafen, *Broken Hand (Thomas Fitzpatrick)*; A. H. Favour, *Old Bill Williams, Mountain Man*.

up of government experts and regular army officers specially detached for exploration; but perhaps the most remarkable feature of their work up to 1840 was its unevenness and incompleteness. Lewis and Clark were sent into the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 not merely to explore the possibility of a northern transcontinental route, but to survey one. Admirably as these great explorers did their work, their path lay too far to the north to be usable as a whole by large parties of settlers. Its eastern section was valuable for the fur-trade branching out from the Upper Missouri, and for little else. Early in the century the government sent additional expeditions to explore the Red River of the South, and other territory between the lower Mississippi and the Spanish domains. But only Zebulon M. Pike accomplished any substantial result, and here again its benefits to colonization were limited. His explorations succeeded in establishing the road to Santa Fé, but the Santa Fé trail was used almost wholly for trading—for that commerce of the prairies upon which Gregg later wrote his classic book. Moreover, the continuation trails to the Pacific remained so generally unknown to any save mountain men and daring traders that when Kearny marched his Army of the West from New Mexico to California in 1846, he had to kidnap Kit Carson and impress him into service as guide. When in 1820 the government sent Major Stephen H. Long west to explore, he penetrated only as far as Long's Peak in eastern Colorado, then visiting the Royal Gorge of the Colorado and returning homeward by way of the valley of the Canadian.

During the next twenty years, 1822-42, the face of the West was but slowly and imperfectly unveiled—very imperfectly indeed to those at a distance. Particularly did the great central area, which time was to prove the most important of all to settlers, remain ill-mapped. Long's expedition had opened the Platte River route to the Rockies. But Long performed no service to settlers when, publishing two volumes of his *Travels in the Interior of North America* in 1828, he grossly overemphasized the arid and inhospitable character of the plains

around the upper Platte and upper Arkansas; for already men made too much of the Great American Desert. We have seen what Long and Featherstonhaugh accomplished, or rather how little they accomplished, in the Minnesota-Dakota country: Nicollet had done far more there for both science and settlement, and his map was extremely useful to emigrants of this area for many years.²

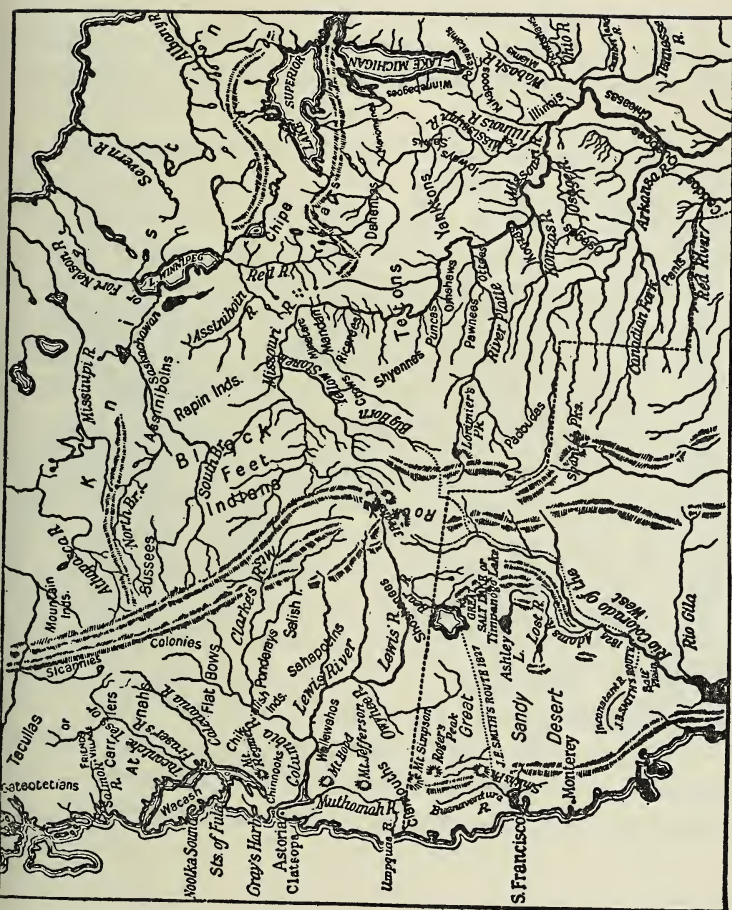
The third group was made up of leaders and heads of fur companies; daring men who possessed more education than trappers like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, who had commercial motives for wishing to see the West explored, and who found means of diffusing the news of discoveries. The forerunner of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, General William H. Ashley, equipped a party under Jedediah Smith and Thomas Fitzpatrick which in 1824 traversed the famous South Pass of the middle Rockies, some eighty miles southwest of the center of Wyoming, and thus opened a long section of what a decade later became known as the Oregon Trail. Ashley himself made in 1824-26 two long journeys (one of them to Great Salt Lake) in which he was the first to follow the Platte in winter, to cross the Rockies by Bridger's Pass, and to navigate the Green River. His chief successor in this trapping group, the intrepid Jedediah Smith, in 1826 led a party from Great Salt Lake to explore the country to the southwest, then quite unknown. Descending first the Virgen River and then the Colorado, he finally struck west across the Mojave Desert and other barren wastes of southern California, reaching San Gabriel Mission, near Los Angeles, in November. Thence he followed the San Joaquin Valley northward for about three hundred miles, spent the winter trapping, and crossed the Sierras and the Nevada plains, reaching Great Salt Lake again. The Rocky Mountain Company had other bold employees—the Sublettes, James Bridger, the before-mentioned Provôt and Fitzpatrick—who made still other discoveries. Before its affairs were

² See E. W. Gilbert's study in historical geography, *The Exploration of Western America, 1800-1850*, Part II; W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*.

wound up in 1836, its men had become familiar with the whole region to the westward of South Pass. They had explored the Green River, the Colorado, the Utah, Sevier, and Great Salt Lake; they had crossed and recrossed the Rockies, the Sierras, and the intervening plains of the Great Basin. Smith had traveled by land up the Pacific Coast from California to the Columbia.³ The employees, who sent \$500,000 worth of beaver pelts to St. Louis and lost about a hundred lives in doing it, had familiarized themselves with a central transcontinental route to the Pacific.

But while these men explored, they did not survey, map, or describe the country. Smith's note-books were lost, and unfortunately no great part of his information found its way to cartographers. When Albert Gallatin in 1836 published in his work on the Indian tribes the best map of the West yet seen, he gathered many of his geographical facts from Smith's and Ashley's statements. But Gallatin's map must to-day excite our wonder chiefly for its inadequacy. Small, ill-proportioned, and lacking in detail, it can be published without essential loss on a duodecimo page. It showed Great Salt Lake, but indicated no mountains between it and the Sierras. It failed to mark the Ogden (later Humboldt) River, or even the San Joaquin. Jedediah Smith's route from the Sierras eastward to Great Salt Lake in 1827 was roughly indicated, and the Nevada-Utah country which he traversed was labeled the "Great Sandy Desert," but no detail whatever was presented upon this area, or upon California. Even less satisfactory in some respects was the map which Captain B. L. E. Bonneville published in

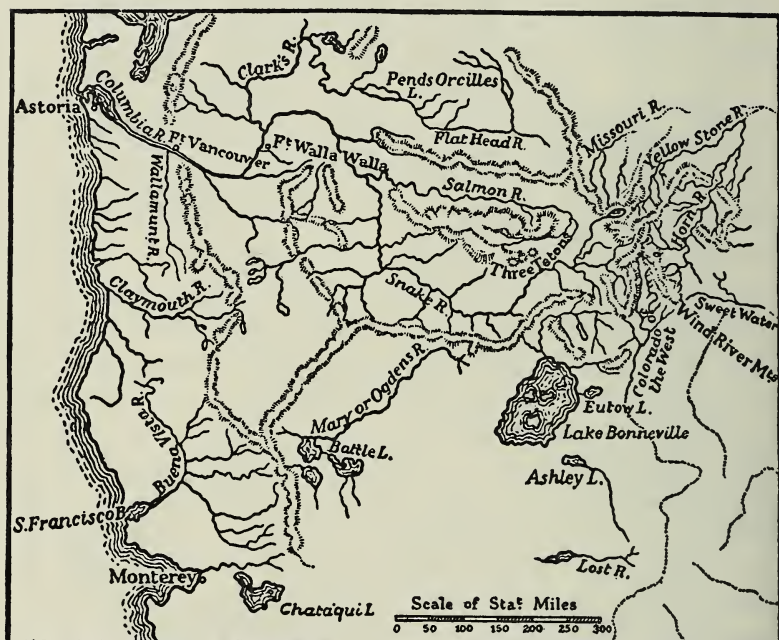
³ Cardinal Goodwin, *The Trans-Mississippi West*, p. 126ff., p. 428ff. The Astor expedition of 1811 went up the Missouri River as far as the Arikaras, near the present North Dakota-South Dakota boundary, and then struck off westward through Wyoming for the Columbia River. But Astor did not attempt the penetration of Wyoming until 1832. For the Smith-Fitzpatrick expedition through the South Pass, see Charles L. Camp, "James Clyman, His Diaries and Reminiscences," in the *Quarterly of the California Historical Society*, June, 1925; Alter's *Bridger*, p. 38. The journal of Robert Stuart, as recently edited by P. A. Rollins in *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail*, shows that a party led by this employee of Astor was the first known to have traversed South Pass (1812).



WESTERN AMERICA, BY ALBERT GALLATIN

FROM *American Antiquarian Society Transactions*, II (1836)

1837.⁴ This was the result of his long expedition in the West in 1832-35, when the fur trade was at the height of its prosperity, with the object primarily of extending the trade and only secondarily of exploring unknown areas. His work, ostensibly unofficial though perhaps secretly encouraged by the Jackson Administration, gave the country a captivating book when he



WESTERN AMERICA, BY B. L. E. BONNEVILLE (1837)

turned his manuscripts over to Washington Irving. But his map could be published on a duodecimo half-page, and at points was actually misleading. It showed a bay at Monterey five times the size of San Francisco Bay, and a lake between

⁴ These maps are reproduced in Gilbert, *Exploration of Western America, 1800-1850*, pp. 199, 200. It should be said that parts of Smith's journals were discovered by M. S. Sullivan; see Sullivan's books, *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* (1934) and *Jedediah Smith, Trade and Trail Breaker* (1936).

Monterey and the Sierras half as large as Great Salt Lake. The main respect in which it surpassed Gallatin's was in its clear delineation of Ogden's (later the Humboldt) River. American knowledge of the trans-Missouri West in 1840, weighed in the scales of the scientific geographer, was far from creditable to the nation; and by 1842 a host of Americans were eager to pour westward for settlement.

The crying need of would-be colonists in that year was for a detailed survey and accurate map of the central routes to the Pacific Northwest and California; a survey and map of day-by-day utility to emigrants. The Gallatin and Bonneville maps were not even rudimentary. The Lewis and Clark route, comparatively well mapped, lay in the main too far north. The Santa Fé route, well known and much traveled, led but half-way to the coast. Upon much of the central belt from South Pass to the Pacific the piecemeal information of Indians, trappers and traders had never been gathered together, and could not be utilized. The fast-gathering forces of emigration needed some really complete summary of both scientific and popular information upon the Oregon Trail, leading through South Pass, the Bear River Valley, the Snake Valley, and on across the Blue Mountains to the Columbia River. They needed a similarly comprehensive body of topographical information upon the shortest paths from the Great Salt Lake to the northern Sierras and down into California; and together with this, a survey of possible routes southward from the Columbia and Willamette Rivers into northern Nevada and California. The nation also needed both exploration and mapping of the huge barren area west and south of Great Salt Lake, which Gallatin had vaguely marked as the Great Sandy Desert, and Bonneville had not marked at all.

But the public felt the need for still another body of materials upon the wilder West; for a full, accurate and readable *description* of its main highways. A scientific map is at best a limited and difficult representation of a country, which few men can read properly, and still fewer have the patience to study.

While American pioneers, from the days of the Wilderness Road, have seldom been extensive map-users, they had always shown themselves hungry for graphic descriptions of the West. This fact accounts for the considerable wealth and variety of those early western travels which Reuben Gold Thwaites later collected, and for the eagerness with which even the pedestrian journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (apart from the captains', only those by John Ordway and Patrick Gass offered any detail), had been seized upon in their early editions. Henry R. Schoolcraft's narratives of his tour to the Ozark district and of his subsequent travels to the source of the Mississippi had attracted much attention. The practical quality of the general curiosity was demonstrated by the response to Zebulon M. Pike's two-volume account of his explorations and captivity in the Spanish Southwest. Since the jealous policy of Madrid had thrown a veil about all her Mexican territories, which many Americans supposed to be full of wealth, his book was eagerly seized upon in the Mississippi Valley. As Gregg says in his *Commerce of the Prairies*, Pike's descriptions "spread like wildfire through the western country," and gave a strong impulse alike to development of the Santa Fé trade and to emigration into Texas. Just so, a multitude of Americans at the close of the thirties were stirred to eager interest in the Rocky Mountain and Oregon country by Irving's brilliant *Adventures of Captain Bonneville* and *Astoria*.⁵

It was at this opportune moment that Frémont came forward to play his part in the West. If we read the next three years of his career aright, we must banish from our minds the legend of a brilliant Lochinvar, a dashing knight-errant of adventure. Frémont was still the product of the training imposed upon him by Poinsett, Nicollet, and Hassler; the training of Charleston College's "scientific department," of mathematics classes on a Federal warship, of officers of the Topographical

⁵ F. L. Paxson, *History of the American Frontier*, p. 333. Irving himself had traveled in 1832 from the Mississippi across the Arkansas Valley to a point within a day's journey of the Texas boundary, and had written charmingly of the trip in *A Tour on the Prairies*.

Survey, of Nicollet's two campaigns. Erase the legend, and we see in him far less a scientific novice than Lewis, Clark, or Zebulon M. Pike, a far more thoroughly trained expert in geographical field-work. The brilliant amateur disappears; there emerges instead an expert, laborious topographer, a careful observer of scientific fact, the director of a hardworking and meticulously accurate survey. The members of the Lewis and Clark expedition had all been simply soldiers and frontiersmen. Encouraged to keep a record of the trip, each had been provided with note-books in a waterproof cover, and several took pains to write down their experiences. But none save William Clark knew how to map the country with even general accuracy; Lewis had picked up his astronomy rather hurriedly, and in turn had given Clark a hurried tuition in the fixing of latitude and longitude; and no member of the party could set down even elementary facts regarding botany and geology, or converse with the Indians.⁶ Pike's notes of his southwestern expedition had been somewhat more valuable than the Lewis and Clark *Journals*, but were seized by the jealous Spaniards and hence unavailable when he wrote of his experiences. Captain Bonneville took some casual and infrequent astronomical observations to establish his position, but the principal value of his memoranda lay in the materials they supplied for Irving's graceful pen. Compared with these men, Frémont was a scientist. There is much in his life which his friends could wish blotted from it; but the five years 1842-46 were a strenuously busy period in which he honestly and laboriously earned his fame as explorer, and performed services of lasting importance to the nation.

Benton, Linn, Dodge, and other believers in national expansion to the Pacific had good reason in 1841 to urge Nicollet

⁶ R. G. Thwaites, *Brief History of Rocky Mountain Exploration*, p. 92ff. As the facsimiles published by Thwaites (not by any means complete) indicate, Clark made some really excellent maps of the country traversed. For materials supplementing the main journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, those by the two leaders, by Ordway, and by Gass, see O. D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*.

to press forward with his report and map so that he might soon take the field again. The time was ripening for action. As the thirties closed and the forties opened, public attention was more and more directed to the Oregon Trail and Santa Fé Trail, and the possibilities of American settlement and trade in Oregon, California, and the Far Southwest. The press, led by the enterprising New York *Herald*, printed special correspondence from the frontier. Events in Texas, which was in the full tide of revolt in 1835 and declared its independence in 1836, kindled eastern interest in trans-Mississippi affairs. The Alamo was captured and its garrison slaughtered in March, 1836; the following month, Sam Houston crushed Santa Anna's army at San Jacinto. Thereafter, Texas was seldom out of the news or absent from the minds of political-minded Americans. Simultaneously, the Oregon country began to press upon the American consciousness. Before the thirties it had been a region as far distant as Outer Mongolia is to-day, where hardy post-traders exchanged blankets and ironware with the Indians for furs. But in 1832 Nathaniel J. Wyeth, with not a little beating of tom-toms, recruited a company in Boston, and led it across the continent to Fort Vancouver. His ambition was to establish a permanent seat of trade with an overland line of supply, and though the Hudson's Bay Company proved too strong for him, he did advertise the commercial possibilities of the region. Methodists and Presbyterians, burning to convert the Indians whom Lewis and Clark had described as possessing such fine traits of character, sent missionaries to the Oregon country in 1834-35, while a year later Dr. Marcus Whitman and his bride crossed the mountains by wagon to set up their mission near the point where the Walla Walla flows into the Columbia.⁷

⁷ J. C. Bell, *Opening a Highway to the Pacific, 1838-1846*, Chs. 3, 4. The Methodists sent four missionaries to the Pacific Northwest in 1834. The Presbyterians sent Marcus Whitman and an associate, Samuel Parker, in 1835; and Whitman, returning east after going only as far as the Green River rendezvous, in the following year went back to the Columbia with four other workers. See W. A. Mowry, *Marcus Whitman*.

At the beginning of the forties the whole border was alive with activity, and the tide of American emigration was ready to roll westward. The panic of 1837 and the lean years following had paralyzed the expansive energies of the country, and compelled men to give their attention to recovery. But now the depression was being succeeded by prosperity. The election of a Westerner as President in 1840, a border hero, a believer like Benton in cheap lands and plenty of them, encouraged the expansionists.

Benton's interest in the West was primarily political and only secondarily scientific; for the Oregon question was plainly approaching a crisis, and he and other western members were resolved that the Northwest must be American up to at least the 49th parallel. For more than twenty years, ever since the treaty of 1818 had established joint Anglo-American sovereignty over the Oregon country, this object had been near to his heart. As we have seen, he had long advocated systematic occupation of the Columbia River Valley under Federal protection. His bill of 1825 had authorized the President to employ the army and navy to establish a port to shelter American trading ships and whalers, to foster the fur trade, and to create a safe overland highway to Oregon. Senator Dickerson of New Jersey, who believed that the region would never be good for anything but an Indian reserve, vehemently objected that "all the sea-otters we shall ever take upon the coast of Oregon Territory would not pay the expense of marching a single company across the Rocky Mountains." Though many shared this incredibly myopic view, Benton persisted year after year in offering his legislation.

It was clear by 1841 that the country was fast being converted by pressure of facts to his stand; only three years later, one of the northern rally-cries in the Polk campaign was "fifty-four forty or fight." The establishment of mission posts in 1835-36 was followed by the immediate emigration of farmers to the new country. This rill of settlement, though at first tiny, demonstrated that the treaty for a condominium with Great

Britain would soon have to be altered, and the bounds of American ownership fixed once for all. An inhabited country would need a single government and courts. The moment the issue of eventual American possession was squarely presented it became important to send settlers westward, and in 1842 Washington gave official encouragement to emigration by appointing Dr. Elijah White as Indian sub-agent in Oregon. Early that year White set off for the Northwest with about one hundred ten persons and eighteen wagons, while other parties, eager for free land in a mild climate, followed him.

The Oregon Trail, as the one well-established route to the beautiful Columbia Valley was known, ran northwest from the town of Independence on the Missouri to near Grand Island on the Platte, and thence turned westward up the Platte Valley to the Rockies, the road being level all the way to a point near the present-day Julesburg, Colorado.⁸ As the trail left the forks of the Platte, the country grew hilly; and after emigrants reached the junction of the Laramie and North Platte, they found it sufficiently mountainous to offer many obstacles to loaded wagons. Their ordinary procedure was to follow the Platte and the Sweetwater River, in a general westward line, to South Pass, in what is now southwestern Wyoming. After crossing this broad, easy divide, they found themselves in the valley of the Green River, down which they moved to the trapping post called Fort Bridger, thence continuing northwest to the Bear and the Snake at Fort Hall. The tortuous course of the Snake was followed to a point beyond Fort Boisé (like Fort Hall, a post of the Hudson's Bay Company), whence the trail cut across the Blue Mountains to Walla Walla, the Columbia Valley, and the goal of the emigrants. Here and there were variations from the established route, like the Sublette cut-off beyond South Pass, which bolder travelers might take. The whole journey from the Missouri to the Willamette was about two thousand miles; and of this one thousand was a rocky,

⁸ See W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon*, and its companion volume, R. L. Duffus, *The Santa Fé Trail*.

steep, Indian-infested trail, with fierce alternations of heat and cold, which rigorously tested the courage of the emigrants. The Idaho country beyond South Pass was especially harsh and dangerous, with rapid torrents, an ill-marked trail which might easily be lost, and brackish or alkaline streams whose water was repugnant to both men and animals. By 1843, the wayfarer met at every difficult point tokens of the hardships which others had suffered; roughly marked gravestones, bones of horses and mules, and the discarded furniture of emigrants who had lightened their wagons. The rocky, sandy route wore out the animals and smashed the wheels. The heavy dust, the burning sun, the thirst, and the long hours exhausted the women and children. It was a land of sagebrush, hunger, Indian peril, fever, and utter fatigue and discouragement. But every student of the West knew that in 1843 and the years following emigrants would pour along the trail by thousands. In fact, within three years after 1842 some five or five and a half thousand Americans had settled in the Oregon country.

This Oregon Trail did not need exploration in the strict sense of the word; many a "pathfinder" had followed it before Frémont, and its course was well known. But it was important to have the route scientifically mapped, to examine the character of South Pass and other salient points, to fix latitudes and longitudes with care, and to report upon the fertility of the soil, navigability of streams, the best positions for forts, and the nature of the mountains beyond the crest of the Rockies in Wyoming. Senators Benton and Linn, with their fellow "Westerners," wished an expedition to do for at least the first section of the long trail what Nicollet had done for the Dakota-Minnesota country. Such exploration would give emigrants assurance of the government's interest, and advertise the importance of Oregon to the eastern public. Indeed, at a later date it was acknowledged that the expedition was "auxiliary to and in aid to emigration to the lower Columbia," though such a statement at the time would have been diplomatically impolitic. Frémont

took part in these discussions, and found that they "gave shape and solidity to my own crude ideas."⁹ His Gallic enthusiasm was aroused by the vision of western empire. "I felt," he wrote later, "I was being drawn into the current of important political events; the object of this expedition was not merely a survey; beyond that was its bearing on the holding of our territory on the Pacific; and the contingencies it involved were large."

There could be little question who would head this expedition. When Frémont and Jessie decided upon their sudden marriage, Nicollet was ill in his old quarters in St. Mary's College in Baltimore, carefully attended by the clergy. These men of secluded lives had welcomed him as the friars of La Rabida welcomed Columbus, for they enjoyed his reports of adventure in the wilderness as much as he enjoyed the security, peace, and comfort of the college. While Frémont worked hard to complete the map, Nicollet was laboring from his sickbed upon the report, to be printed as a Senate document. He wished to make this, like the map, a model to be followed by all other scientific explorers in government service. But now he was not only weak but thoroughly dispirited, suffering from complete nervous exhaustion. He could not muster sufficient energy to prosecute his work steadily, and his composition seemed to him feeble compared with his ideal of a scientific document. He lay abed late every morning, and sometimes did not rise all day, doing a little discouraged writing on a pad. Immediately after their wedding, Frémont and Jessie slipped away on a train to visit him, and the sight of their fresh, glowing happiness momentarily revived his spirits. But he soon relapsed into his former gloom, and though in intervals of exceptional energy and animation he came to Washington and visited the young couple, whom he fondly called *mes enfants*, he was plainly near the end of his career. He conjured up imaginary discouragements and obstacles in everything he undertook. Every discussion of the plan for mapping the Oregon Trail, an under-

⁹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 65, 66.

taking which he knew to be totally beyond his strength, aroused in him a spirit of melancholy.¹⁰

Frémont, hoping to succeed Nicollet as head of the proposed expedition, for a time was uncertain of the post. Then on New Year's Day the plans of the group of expansionists were fully matured, and he was assured of their support. That holiday season had been one of great happiness to the newly married couple. On New Year's afternoon Frémont and Jessie went to call on President Tyler, and accepted Hassler's offer of his large foreign-built carriage, the "ark." In this lumbering vehicle they arrived at the White House and alighted, Jessie in full dress, Frémont in uniform, amid the pleased smiles of the crowd. It was a balmy, sunny day, like May; the Executive Mansion had been thrown open to the public at noon, and every street leading to it was crowded with carriages and hacks. While the Marine Band discoursed music in the vestibule, Tyler shook hands in the East Room with a crush of visitors eminent and obscure. The crowd was said to be the greatest the White House had seen since President Jackson had exhibited Colonel Meacham's gigantic cheese. Calhoun was there, Winfield Scott blazing with the insignia of his rank, the Hon. Cost Johnson with Lady Blanc on his arm, Webster, looking rugged and cheerful, and a large group of Democratic Senators—among them Benton.¹¹

After the call, Jessie returned early to her father's house to assist in receiving guests; a family dinner followed; the charming Senator Linn and other "Westerners" came in; and the men withdrew to talk over their plans. Benton was emphatic in saying that Nicollet could never recover sufficiently to serve, that they must not wait, and that Frémont must at once make preparations to take charge. An allotment of \$30,000 had

¹⁰ J. H. Alexander wrote Hassler from Baltimore September 1, 1842: "Poor M. Nicollet, whom I went to see today for the first time for a fortnight, has been quite sick. He has been in a very bad way." Hassler MSS, New York Public Library. Nicollet's *Report* was printed as *Senate Doc.* 237, 26th Cong., 2d Sess.

¹¹ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library; New York *Herald*, January 4, 1842.

already been arranged for the expedition in the money budgeted for the Topographical Corps. The appropriation of this sum had to be handled diplomatically; President Tyler, much more intent upon the annexation of Texas than upon the acquisition of Oregon, was cautiously averse to measures which might lead to a clash with England. His Secretary of War, John C. Spencer of New York, was opposed to hasty expansion anywhere in the West. But such experienced parliamentarians as Benton and Linn had little difficulty in obtaining the appropriation. "With the New Year," writes Frémont, "began my joint work with Mr. Benton in behalf of our western territories. The months immediately following were occupied in preparation."

Lieutenant-Colonel J. J. Abert, head of the Topographical Corps, issued orders for the expedition which Frémont thought inadequate. Carrying them back for alteration, he persuaded Abert to fix the Rocky Mountains as the object of exploration and the South Pass the chief point to be examined and mapped. Benton tells us ¹² that "the design was conceived by the young lieutenant," and that President Tyler knew nothing about it.

¹² Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, 478.

VII

The First Expedition

PROBABLY there was no happier young man in the country on May 2, 1842, than John C. Frémont. We can imagine him taking leave of his wife of six months in the Benton home; kissing Mrs. Benton; receiving some pompous, fatherly admonitions from the Senator; and, spruce in his blue and gold uniform, running down the steps in the warm spring sunshine to the carriage that was to take him to the railway station. He was but twenty-nine years old. Yet he was at last in full command of his own expedition, with a long summer of outdoor life and adventure ahead of him, and an opportunity to achieve new distinction as an explorer. The poor half-orphan of the Charleston streets, the youth brought into the backdoor of the Army by Poinsett's influence, had achieved a position that any West Pointer might envy: the son-in-law of Senator Benton, the husband of the most charming girl in the capital, the successor of the famous Nicollet.

Could he have foreseen what a pleasant and profitable expedition lay before him, his feeling of elation would have been heightened. Frémont within the next decade was to pass through harrowing physical hardship, but this first expedition included few days that he could not remember with pleasure. It was a summer's tour in the kindest of weather. It was not too ambitious; going only as far as the South Pass and Wind River Mountains, he penetrated no dangerous country. Yet it was sufficiently full of contacts with Indians, buffalo, and frontiersmen, of adventures on plain, mountain precipice, and river rapids. At the end he was to receive not only the congratulations of Lieutenant-Colonel Abert and Senator Benton,

but a public interest and recognition which surpassed his best hopes.

It took twenty days for the lieutenant, accompanied by Jessie's brother Randolph, to reach the Missouri. Those curious as to his mode of travel may find a full description in the works of a man not much older than Frémont himself, who followed substantially the same route that spring—Charles Dickens. Both went from Washington to St. Louis, and there can be no doubt that in essentials, if not details, they used the same means. First there were the "cars" to Baltimore, then a steamboat to Philadelphia. The Harrisburg mail-coach, huge, lumbering, and crowded, with Frémont's carefully watched baggage on top, took him up the valley of the Susquehanna, and into Harrisburg. Here a canal-boat was waiting, where Frémont, like Dickens, could have "sat down to tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steak, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black puddings, and sausages." As they crossed the Alleghenies they began to meet rough western types like the frontiersman Dickens heard protesting against a crowded boat-cabin: "This may suit you, it may, but it don't suit me . . . I'm a brown forester, I am. I ain't a Johnny Cake. There are no smooth skins where I live. We're rough men there. Rather. If Down Easters and men of Boston raising like this, I'm glad of it, but I'm none of that raising nor of that breed. No. This company wants a little fixing, it does."

From Pittsburgh to Cincinnati the travelers had their choice of a number of high-pressure steamboats, where tiny staterooms gave some privacy, and where they could sit in a narrow gallery outside and gaze upon the changing green shores of the Ohio. They were crude affairs, these steamboats, with high iron chimneys and a glassed steering-cabin atop, a mass of ill-built staterooms, two cabins, one for men and one for women, between decks, and underneath everything the hickory-fed furnace and the machinery, open to every wind. Dickens, seeing the furnace "that rages and roars beneath the frail pile of painted wood," the machinery working away amidst a crowd

of idlers, emigrants, and children, and the management of the boat entrusted to reckless, inexperienced men, concluded that the wonder was, not that there should be so many fatal accidents, but so many safe journeys.¹

Where the Ohio began to broaden into a noble river, Frémont could feel that he was again entering the wilderness; for while they passed an occasional town or hamlet, the banks were for the most part a leafy solitude, with no clearings, no thread of smoke from a log cabin, no life but the flash of the blue jay or tanager. Only here and there could he see wheat coming up green amid the stumps of a new farm, and the lank settler leaning on his ax and gazing curiously as the steamboat throbbed past. Here and there, too, the steamer landed a little group—a roughly dressed man, a woman in calico, a few children, and some old chairs and cooking utensils—to begin their pioneering venture. Sometimes at night, after gliding for hours through the silent darkness, they came suddenly to a spot where men were “burning off,” and the tall trees stood sharply defined in the red glow of the fires of brush and logs. Cincinnati they found a beautiful city with well-paved streets, clean, fresh-painted houses, shops that would do credit to New York, and a suburb, Mount Auburn, on the high bluffs, where pretty villas stood in well-kept gardens. Here Frémont, like Dickens, probably took a larger and better steamboat, and once more the wilderness closed around him.

Men who made such a journey in 1842 found the tide of western travel mounting to a torrent. The boats were crowded with land-speculators, talking of fortunes in the new Illinois and Iowa townships; surveyors; Louisville and Cincinnati drummers; an occasional hunter and trapper, conspicuous in leather garments and coonskin cap; frontiersmen who found their old homes too crowded and were seeking new; and above all, a motley throng, mechanics from the East, Englishmen with capital, Irishmen without, and guttural Germans, hunting cheap land and free opportunities. Their talk was of the great new Mor-

¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, Ch. XI.

mon community growing up at Nauvoo, Illinois; of the money which Kentuckians made by taking droves of mules and horses to market through Cumberland Gap; of the latest lynching in Arkansas or Missouri; of the work the government was doing for the Chicago harbor, and the huge lake trade; of new river cities like Hannibal, Quincy, and Keokuk; and of the trade the Magoffin brothers were carrying on with caravans of goods to Santa Fé. Some were talking of the Missouri trading posts and the Oregon country. The curiosity of the emigrants when the Ohio boat reached the Mississippi was intense. The enormous stream, a mile wide, sometimes two or three, pouring its muddy flood lazily southward, rolling whole forest trees along in its frothy current, their tangled roots sometimes dangerously grazing the steamboat's sides; dotted with lumber rafts, old-fashioned arks, hay-boats, keel-boats filled with flour and bacon, and skiffs; the steaming marshes; the far-away vistas of forest opened up by an occasional creek—all this produced an irresistible impression of power and wildness.

Frémont's imagination must have responded to it. He knew that every turnpike, every canal and lake route from East to West, was adding its share to the volume of emigrant travel. He recalled Benton's prediction that within a century the population west of the Rockies would exceed the whole population of the nation in 1820.² And here he was, avant-courier and pathmarker for this human stream so rapidly remaking America!

Reaching St. Louis, Frémont was received at one of its finest mansions—the home of Mrs. Sarah Benton Brant, Mrs. Benton's favorite niece and the wife of an old friend and army officer.³ Here he had not only a room, but an introduction to the best St. Louis society, curious to see Colonel Benton's son-in-law. Yet he tarried only a few days. He or Benton had doubtless written ahead to the Chouteaus in St. Louis to assemble men and material, which they could easily do; and Cyprian

² *Register of Debates in Congress*, I, p. 712.

³ Frémont, *Memoirs*, uncorrected proof sheets, Bancroft Library.

Chouteau now gave his entire time to Frémont's needs. Preparations were quickly completed. Frémont records an observation of latitude and longitude at the Brant house on May 27th, and certainly within a few days thereafter he was on his way up the river.

The personnel and equipment of this party were to a considerable extent typical of his later ventures. One man had been hired before leaving Washington—Charles Preuss, a skilled German topographer. He had called one evening on Frémont with a note from Hassler, his face so red, his voice so incoherent from nervousness, that they had at first thought him drunk. A failure of appropriations had thrown him out of employment, and Frémont saw to it that his family, then in need, were provided with a Christmas dinner. He did more; he found a job for Preuss in reducing astronomical observations, and since Preuss knew nothing of such tasks, himself performed the work at night. Thus he kept the man on a payroll until the expedition started. This service Preuss repaid by years of devoted and much-enduring service as topographer. In St. Louis Frémont hired as hunter the frontiersman Lucien B. Maxwell, son-in-law of a wealthy New Mexican merchant, and himself in later years owner of the vast Maxwell grant. Henry Brant, young son of Frémont's host, was taken along as general aide. In addition to these and the boy Randolph, there were nineteen voyageurs, most of them French Creoles of long experience in the fur trade; the most notable being Basil Lajeunesse, of the Santa Fé Trail, Taos, and Bent's Fort, who later lost his life in Frémont's service. All were well armed, and all but eight mounted on good horses. These eight drove as many mule-carts, packed with baggage, instruments, and food. Some loose horses and four oxen for slaughtering completed the train.⁴

What the party at first lacked was a frontiersman of

⁴ J. C. Frémont, *A Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying Between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers*. This report, published in various forms, is a general authority for this chapter and will not be cited again.

thorough acquaintance with the plains and mountains to serve as guide. For a time Frémont had thought of employing an old experienced "mountain-man," Major Andrew Drips, who had trapped through much of the Rockies for the American Fur Company, and Pierre Chouteau wrote to Drips in Frémont's behalf; but a much better man unexpectedly became available.⁵ A rare stroke of luck threw Frémont into contact with one of the most efficient, and certainly the most picturesque, of western scouts, Kit Carson. In his autobiography Carson says simply that he met with Frémont, informed him that he had spent some time in the mountains and believed that he could guide the party to any point it wished to go, and after some inquiry, was employed. Frémont's story is fuller. He writes that as his party was ascending the Missouri by steamboat from St. Louis to Chouteau's Post, or Kansas Landing, near the present site of Kansas City, his attention was drawn to a man of medium height, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, of clear, steady eye and frank, modest speech. It was Carson, and the lieutenant was so much pleased with his personality and qualifications that he was glad to accept his services. Perhaps the fact that Carson and Lucien Maxwell were old companions and close friends had something to do with the arrangement.

The attraction between Carson and Frémont, which gave birth to a deep and life-long attachment, was largely the magnetism of opposites. Carson showed his Scotch-Irish ancestry as clearly as Frémont did his French blood; he was cool, quiet, observant, and determined, while Frémont was quick, sensitive, passionate, and impetuous. His rugged honesty, his transparent sincerity, his gentleness and kindness (save to Indians and Mexicans, whom he regarded as most frontiersmen did), his loyalty and reliability, made him unusual among mountaineers. Possessing no high intellectual qualities, probably inferior in mental grasp to such a frontiersman as Thomas Fitzpatrick ("Broken Hand"), and no better acquainted with western wilds than Jim Bridger, Fitzpatrick, or several other contempo-

⁵ Pierre Chouteau, Maffitt MSS, Missouri Historical Society, Collection D.

rarities, he owed his preëminence chiefly to the solidity and wholesomeness of his character. It was precisely in solidity and balance that Frémont was most deficient. Both were young men, Carson being thirty-three; but Carson, who was a widower and father—he had visited St. Louis to place his young daughter with relatives or in a Catholic school—was much the more mature. Both might be called well educated, but in very different senses. Frémont's education was almost all scientific, Carson's was almost all the practical education of that frontier to which he had been an apprentice since the age of fifteen. He possessed no book-knowledge, he was as yet unable to read and write, and he spoke an ungrammatical lingo of the Southwest, something like the "Pike" dialect that later found its way into print. But his mind was broader, and more thorough, if less superficially brilliant, than Frémont's, and he had made the utmost of his opportunities for learning what is not in books. He had a serviceable command of French, Spanish, and several Indian tongues, could carry on a conversation with unfamiliar tribes by signs, and had fully mastered the lore of plains and mountains.

Since Frémont was to see much not only of Carson but of other mountain-men, we may pause briefly to examine the ways of this picturesque and useful breed of men.⁶ Many of the principal figures led lives that were stamped by a remarkable similarity, for as a group they passed through three well-defined phases. The mountain-men appeared early in the century as trappers, threading the snow-crowned ranges and following the rushing streams through dark fir-clad valleys or cañons of red rock for beaver pelts. By 1842 the beaver, forerunners of the buffalo, were so nearly exterminated that trapping became unprofitable, while the tides of conquest and settlement were about to flow over the Far West. Some mountain-men, therefore, as masters of topography, veritable walking maps, turned aside to guide exploring expeditions like Frémont's, parties of emigrants, and military columns; others turned to supplying emigrant trains with meat and other necessities. But that phase

⁶ Compare Stanley Vestal, *Mountain Men*.

proved even more transient than the day of the trapper. Within another fifteen years the West had become so well mapped and so largely settled that guides lagged superfluous on the stage. Some adventurous frontiersmen, like Hawkeye in *The Prairie*, turned at last into prosaic farmers, some to trade, and some to government appointments as Indian agents.

Nothing better demonstrates the general similarity of their careers than the striking parallelism in the lives of Carson, Fitzpatrick, and James Bridger; men representing three different blood-strains, hailing from three widely separated points, and wholly unlike in character and gifts. Carson, of Scottish blood, was born in Kentucky, Fitzpatrick, of Irish, in County Cavan, and Bridger, of English, in Virginia. Yet their lives were molded by social and geographical forces into much the same pattern. All three, carried by the westward movement to Missouri, began their careers from that state within a half dozen years of its admission into the Union. Bridger at St. Louis in 1822 joined General William Ashley's first expedition up the Missouri to trap furs—that famous undertaking in which the general advertised for "one hundred enterprising young men." A year later Fitzpatrick, having drifted westward from his emigrant ship, joined Ashley's second expedition up the Missouri. In 1826 Kit Carson, his father dead, apprenticed to a harsh Missouri saddler, ran away to join an expedition to Santa Fé, and was soon trapping with Ewing Young's party in the Southwest. All three spent fewer than twenty years as trappers and hunters, when the depletion of the beaver colonies brought their calling to an end. Fitzpatrick quit the mountains in 1841 to guide the first emigrant train, the Bidwell-Bartleson party, from the Missouri to Fort Hall. Carson quit in 1842 to join Frémont. Bridger quit in 1842 to establish the first important supply-station on the Oregon Trail, Fort Bridger. The days of the old-time trapper were gone forever. Then, after a few years, the curtain rose on the third and quietest phase in the lives of the three men. They must perforce adjust themselves to an increasingly settled and workaday West. The gov-

ernment in 1846 appointed Fitzpatrick as Indian agent for the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and part of the Sioux on the upper Platte and Arkansas. In 1853 it appointed Carson as Indian agent at Taos in charge of two tribes of Utes. Bridger, driven out of his way-station business in 1853 by the Mormons, thereafter divided his time between farming and government positions, repeatedly acting as official interpreter and intermediary with the Indians, and as an army guide.

Naturally it is the first phase in the lives of these rovers which has chiefly appealed to students of the West. They were as distinct a group, these mountain-men, as the cowboys who came later; a hard, practical race, who dealt in the unknown, and without compass, often without companion, wrested a living from its perils. The French *coureurs*, a daring set of adventurers, had been the first to penetrate the West, but the cooler, longer-headed, deadly shooting Missourians, born woodsmen all, easily surpassed them. The trappers were of course rude and ignorant, with frontier manners; so wild that, like Kit, they were glad to marry Indian women; many of them with records as killers. A streak of pride, a wild vanity often entered into their composition, and they liked to be called "white Injuns," but off of the trail and away from the rendezvous they were essentially modest. After all, the pride was chiefly in their stoic endurance of exertions, toils, and privations, their prowess with trap, knife, and ax, their deadliness with their trusted guns—Old Bullthrower; Knock-Him-Stiff; Old Straightener. A trapper might take many wives, but he was monogamous in his devotion to his rifle. They were hard workers, hard players, hard fighters, hard drinkers—even Kit, in his early days; they were inured to excess. Leading lives of perfect liberty in the wilderness, in society they often turned to perfect license; and in his autobiography even the quiet Kit speaks of his wild early courses when fresh in Taos from the lonely trail with money burning in his pocket and the barroom and fandango to allure him.

Their roving mountain life, for all its hardships, grime, and

peril, was sweet at the bottom of the cup; its wild intoxication, like that of the sea, gradually entering the veins. Ashley said after he entered Congress that his best days had been his mountain days, his best friends his trapper friends. That adventurous Briton, Lieutenant George F. Ruxton, on his last trip to the Far West wrote his New York publisher that he was "half froze for buffler meat and mountain doin's," and died seeking his favorite spot beyond the Park Range, "my solitary camp in the Bayou Salade." Kit Carson, for twenty years a tireless wanderer, ever courting new adventures, felt this fascination as much as the others. He even more than others was absolutely fearless, for death rode close by each trapper as by Dürer's knight. It was death in a dozen forms—by famine; by sudden blizzard in the savage mountains; from wild beasts; from still wilder savages; "anything possible and nothing permanent except death." Three great preoccupations ever filled the trapper's mind—beaver, buffalo, and Indians; fur, meat, and peril; money, food, and war. Carson knew as well as any one how to set his line of Newhouse beaver-traps, to bait them with the medicine of pungent oils used by the mountain-men, to skin, grain, and stretch the pelts for dry-curing in the sun, to pack them into bales for carriage to market. He was as expert as the best in detecting beaver-sign on apparently deserted streams and in reaping a rich harvest up solitary valleys. Sometimes hundreds of pelts, worth eight dollars or more apiece, would be taken on a single small river. Like other mountain-men, he became a remarkable horseman. He was "the most daring and reckless of riders," avers his Taos friend Oliver Wiggins, adding that he could "with ease pick up a silver dollar from the ground, when going at full speed, mounted on the swiftest pony." At one time he delighted to take a heavy American horse and "dash down steep hills at full gallop." Hardihood, nerve, perfect health, and a delight in reckless feats, made trapping and guiding an ideal occupation for half his lifetime.⁷

⁷ E. L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, *passim*.

As the years passed, Carson had extended his activities until few men knew the great West so well, or could be trusted to meet every wilderness contingency so expertly. He had won his first spurs as member of a singularly daring expedition. With Ewing Young's trapping party, he had crossed upper Arizona and the Mojave, gone west to Los Angeles, and then, turning north, had traversed California to the Sacramento River, there lingering for some time. This acquaintance with interior California was later to serve Frémont well. Then entering the service of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, a number of years before he met Frémont he carried a zigzag line through the Rockies north from Taos almost to the Canadian boundary. He and his companions on this remarkable trip first struck into the interior of Colorado, then crossed the continental divide at South Pass, and continuing through western Wyoming, finally reached the Salmon River in northern Idaho, where they spent the winter with the friendly Nez Percé. Thereafter, in one employ or another, Carson was found in successive years at widely scattered points in the West, his trails making an intricate network. He was in the Three Forks country, part of the sources of the Missouri; along the valley of the Green; with an expedition which went down the Humboldt in northern Nevada; at Fort Hall on the Snake; and with James Bridger on the Yellowstone. Incessantly moving, incessantly observant, he was accumulating an unsurpassed fund of information upon all parts of the West, from the Gila to the Columbia, from the Sacramento to the Platte.

By the time Carson met Frémont, no one was better skilled in Indian customs, ways, and mental habits, and no one knew more of the craft of mountains and plains. His sagacity, caution, and quick intuition had become famous. Place him in a situation of imminent danger from Indians, wild beasts, or prairie fire, and he would instantly devise the best means of extricating himself. Once in 1833, while his party were trapping on the Arkansas, some Crow Indians stole nine horses from them, and Carson and others went in pursuit. Creeping

at night upon the Indian encampment, they succeeded in leading the horses off while the Indians slept. Most of the party favored immediate flight with their recovered property, for they would have a start of several hours. But Carson demurred because he desired revenge. Moreover, he grasped the dangerous elements in the situation: the horses were exhausted; they would assuredly be followed; the Indians outnumbered them three to one and could surround them at pleasure, when they would certainly be shot from ambush without mercy. Their proper course, he thought, was to attack the savages. In the battle which followed Carson's men, profiting by surprise, won an easy and bloody victory. One of his undoubted faults at this period was his implacable harshness toward Indians. But we must remember that throughout much of the West hostilities were almost incessant. Lieutenant G. Douglas Brewerton in his fine narrative of a ride with Kit Carson has described his ingrained caution whenever in hostile country: ⁸

During this journey I have often watched Carson's preparation for the night. A braver man than Kit perhaps never lived. In fact, I doubt if he ever knew what fear was. But with all this he exercised great caution. While arranging his bed his saddle, which he always used as a pillow, was disposed in such a manner as to form a barricade for his head. His pistols, half-cocked, were placed above it, and his trusty rifle reposed beneath the blanket by his side, where it was not only ready for instant use, but perfectly protected from the damp. Except now and then to light his pipe, you never caught Kit at night exposing himself to the full glare of the camp-fire.

Though Carson had been doing fairly well as one of the best trappers alive, as trader, and as hunter for Bent's Fort, he knew that the days of profitable beaver-taking in the West were numbered, and was glad to accept a fixed salary. Frémont offered him \$100 a month. Moreover, Carson's visit to Missouri had left him restless and in the mood for a roving summer

⁸ Lieutenant George Douglas Brewerton, *A Ride With Kit Carson*, first published in *Harper's Magazine*, 1853-54, since issued in book form.

trip. He had spent only ten days in St. Louis, for though he was curious as to the sights of the town, the noise, crowds, and heat wearied him; "for many consecutive years," he said later, "I never slept under the roof of a house, or gazed upon the face of a white woman." He longed for new scenes in the open. The friendship begun on the little Missouri steamboat struggling upstream in the June sunshine of 1842 was to last until Carson's death in 1868, and throughout two expeditions was to be the happiest of partnerships. Carson could truthfully inform a Senate committee six years later that he was "under more obligations to Frémont than to any other man alive." Until now, his name had seldom if ever appeared in print, and he was totally unknown outside his own trapper circles; but Frémont was to give him a generous publicity which would make him famous throughout the land. This service he was to repay by unremitting loyalty and unselfish effort. "With me," testified Frémont in a letter of 1847, "Carson and Truth mean the same thing. He is always the same—gallant and disinterested."

At the Cyprian Chouteau post, about ten miles up from the mouth of the Kansas, Carson hurried two Delaware runners off down the Santa Fé Trail to Taos, with instructions for about fifteen of his own men to meet him, with equipment, at Fort Laramie. The final parcels were placed in the carts. On Friday, June 10th, the column lengthened out from the belt of woods bordering the Kansas, past several well-kept Indian farms, and on to the open prairie. The routine of the march was at once established, and, as it was typical of later expeditions, we may glance at it in some detail.

Frémont and Carson planned their discipline, like that of all emigrant trains, freight caravans, and trapping bands, in a way to give them constant protection against a surprise attack. They did not wait until dusk to camp, but chose a suitable spot a good hour or two before nightfall. By sunset they had the carts wheeled into a compact circle. Within this effective barricade the tents were pitched, with a merry din of stake-driving; saddles, blankets, and eating utensils were thrown down; four

fires were kindled and kettles slung for as many different messes; and a homelike scene soon presented itself. Meanwhile, the horses and mules had been hobbled and turned loose, under a guard, to graze. While it was yet broad daylight, the men ate supper, and the fires were allowed to die down so that they would throw no dangerous illumination over the camp. When darkness fell, the animals were driven close to the wagons, and picketed by a twenty or thirty-foot halter, which permitted them to get a little grass. Camp guard was mounted at eight, and the three sentries were relieved every two hours, the last or morning watch constituting the horse guard for the day.

By nine o'clock, the tired men were usually wrapped in slumber; by half past four, they were aroused. The horses and mules were again turned loose with hobbles, breakfast was eaten, and by six-thirty they were on the march again. At noon, they would halt for one, or sometimes two, hours, rather to rest the animals than the men. Such was the regular daily procedure, disturbed only by accident or unexpected physical obstacles. A stormy night was at first their chief hardship, for it meant sleeping in muddy puddles. Twenty-eight miles over the open prairie seems to have been regarded as "a hard day's march," and twenty-four miles was more usual.

The provisions of the camp were substantial and not altogether Spartanly simple. The party carried sugar, and great were the lamentations of one of the messes when, in crossing the swollen Kansas at the usual ford, it lost its supply in the muddy waters. Greater still was the regret of the whole expedition when, at the same crossing, almost all its coffee disappeared under the swirling current.⁹ They purchased some twenty pounds from a half-breed, but this did not go far. Later they fell back upon a tea brewed from the roots of the wild cherry. In the early stages they were able to buy from the Indians vegetables—pumpkins, onions, beans, and lettuce. Later, when they came up with the herds of buffalo, the men

⁹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 75.

were jubilant over the supply of tender meat. Shouts and songs resounded from every part of the line, and the evening camp-fires signaled a feast which ended only with the break-up of the encampment the following morning; at any time of the night, men might be seen roasting the choicest bits—the hump, the tenderloin, the tongue, the sirloin steaks—*en appolas* (that is, on sticks) over the fire. There was no scarcity of tobacco, and at first enough bread, though later it became a coveted luxury. Of course the garb of the men, as the journey lengthened, grew steadily more ragged. A dozen days out they met a party of trappers coming from a long sojourn in the interior; “we laughed then at their forlorn and vagabond appearance,” says Frémont, “and in our turn, a month or two afterward, furnished the same occasion for merriment to others.”

Frémont was busy from morning to midnight. He maintained discipline with an iron hand under a glove of unvarying tact. He occupied himself evening and noon, when the weather permitted, in taking astronomical observations; he carefully observed botanical and geological features of the country, and wrote a detailed daily journal. The map of the expedition was kept complete from day to day, and Preuss was assigned the task of sketching any scene or position of unusual importance. At various halts, the men were trained in firing at a mark and in repelling attacks.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78ff.

VIII

South Pass and Frémont's Peak

THIS first expedition, thus led by Frémont and guided by Carson, was absent from June 15, 1842, the date when they left the ford of the Kansas, until October 1st, when, marching down the Missouri, the men at daybreak heard the cowbells on the first border farms. In three and a half months it accomplished all the objects expected by the government, and still others expected only by Benton and his fellow-expansionists. Nominally, the expedition was intended to acquaint the government with the nature of the "rivers and country between the frontiers of Missouri and the base of the Rocky Mountains; and especially to examine the character, and ascertain the latitude and longitude of the South Pass, the great crossing-place to these mountains on the way to Oregon." Actually, as Benton's before-quoted statement upon the government's ignorance of its main conception indicates, it had far larger objects in view. Senator Linn intended to bring into the next session of Congress (1842-43) another bill for the occupation of Oregon; and Frémont's expedition was a preparatory measure. As he himself writes, it was "auxiliary to and in aid to the emigration to the Lower Columbia," already in full swing; and it was intended not only to advertise the easiness of the Platte River-South Pass route, but to "indicate and describe the line of travel, and the best positions for military posts."

The party first proceeded up the Kansas to observe the general character of its valley, and then crossed to the Platte, which it followed to the foothills of the Rockies. It was a great moment when, on July 9th, they caught their first glimpse of

the snowy summit of Long's Peak. Next day they halted at St. Vrain's Fort, a trading-post about forty miles north of present-day Denver, where the courtly Ceran St. Vrain, of the St. Louis trading-firm of Bent, St. Vrain & Co., himself welcomed them. Struggling up the Sweetwater Valley, the party on August 8th reached South Pass. This was not, as Frémont in spite of all that Carson had told him, was surprised to find, an abrupt break in the mountain wall, but a broad opening reached by such a gradual ascent that he had difficulty in fixing the precise point of the Continental Divide, where the waters flowing east parted from those flowing to the Pacific. There was no gorge, like the Allegheny gaps or Alpine passes. Instead, a wide sandy road lifted by a slow and regular grade to the summit, about 7,000 feet above the sea.

The party, now 950 miles from the mouth of the Kansas, continued its march to the headwaters of the Green River, which flows into the Colorado. This reached, Frémont set out to explore the Wind River chain, a magnificent group of snow-capped mountains, the highest in Wyoming, which rose before them, pile upon pile, their icy caps glittering in the bright light of the August day.

The spectacular feat of the expedition, whose leader always delighted in the spectacular, was the ascent of what Frémont mistakenly considered the highest peak of the Central Rockies, Frémont's Peak, which is 13,730 feet high. One other summit in the Wind River chain, Gannett Peak, five miles north, is actually some fifty or sixty feet higher, while Colorado has almost thirty peaks of 14,000 feet or more. Nor is Frémont's Peak difficult of access or dangerous to the climber. Frémont and five companions set out early on the morning of August 15th; they found themselves, after some rough ascents, riding beneath a nearly perpendicular wall of granite, terminating from two to three thousand feet above their heads in a serrated line of broken, jagged cones. At what seemed the best point, they undertook to mount this wall, climbing leisurely. Three little lakes of dark emerald, apparently deep, lay in a chasm below.

Above the snow line, they had to use thin moccasins of buffalo skin, and at one point Frémont worked his way across a vertical precipice by clinging to the crevices; but from the ledge thus gained it was an easy matter to reach the crest.

"I sprung upon the summit," writes Frémont, "and another step would have precipitated me into an immense snow field five hundred feet below. To the edge of this field was a sheer icy precipice; and then, with a gradual fall, the field sloped off for about a mile until it struck the foot of another ridge." Though the day was sunny and bright, a slight shining mist obscured the view over the surrounding country. Nevertheless, the prospect was inspiring. To the west, they descried a vast shining network of lakes and streams, the waters from which fed the Colorado; and on the other side, the deep-forested trough of the Wind River Valley, with the faint gleam of streams which flowed into the Yellowstone and down to the Missouri. Far northwestward, bright in the haze, they could pick out the snowy peaks of the Three Tetons, which marked the sources of the Snake and the Columbia. Frémont's breast expanded as he surveyed this immense landscape. Fixing a ramrod in the gneiss, he unfurled a special flag, carrying the regulation thirteen stripes, but bearing in the corner a white field with a blue eagle perched upon an Indian pipe of peace, and blue stars.¹ They lingered till mid-afternoon, when they returned to their cache of dried coffee and meat at the foot of the peak, and slept that night on the rocks.

The principal adventure of the party occurred on its return. Frémont's orders were to survey the Platte, and he wished to save time by making as much use of waterways as possible. While still on the Sweetwater, he had his men inflate the collapsible rubber boat which he had brought from the East, and load it with the instruments and equipment he carried. The shallowness of the stream made progress impossible, and they took to the land again. But when the Platte was reached, they found it flowing broad and deep, swollen beyond its usual size.

¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 151, 152.

Frémont therefore divided his party. The larger group he directed to proceed across country on foot to a point named Goat Island, an unmistakable mark; while he, Preuss, and five others provisioned the rubber boat for a dozen days, and began the descent by water. After a few hours, a hollow roar announced that a series of falls was before them. Frémont reconnoitered, and then, thinking of the heavy labor of unloading his apparatus and other baggage, recklessly determined to run the rapids. He did not know until afterward that some eighteen years earlier Fitzpatrick had lost a valuable cargo of beaver pelts at this point.

One series of little cataracts was traversed successfully, the elastic boat bending to every shock. A steeper and fiercer channel lay just ahead, shut in by high rocky walls; but emboldened by their previous success they decided to risk its descent also. Everything was tied securely; the men threw off most of their clothing, and pushed into the stream. To save the valuable chronometer, Preuss took it and attempted to walk along the stream on rocks which were piled up on either side, but shortly found that the shore disappeared and the walls fell vertically into the torrent. He therefore clambered back into the boat, which moved more and more swiftly.

At once it became plain that their position was perilous. They had attached a rope about fifty feet long to the stern of the boat, and three men had been left to clamber along the rocks with it, trying to lessen its speed. All in vain; after a few hundred feet they realized that their *Bucephalus* was too much for them: "To go back was impossible; the torrent before us was a sheet of foam; and, shut up in the chasm by the rocks, which in some places seemed almost to meet overhead, the roar of the waters was deafening." The force of the torrent became too great for the men on shore to withstand. Two of them loosed their hold, but Basil Lajeunesse hung on an instant too long, and was jerked head foremost from a twelve-foot ledge into the boiling water. The boat shot downstream like an arrow, Lajeunesse being carried down after it in the

rapid waters and needing all his strength as a swimmer to keep from being dashed against the rocky shore. His head could be seen at momentary intervals as a black spot bobbing in the foam. Fortunately, the boat was soon brought into an eddy below and held stationary long enough to allow the half-drowned man to be dragged over its gunwale, cursing. Then, after catching breath, they went on, and in another moment met disaster: ²

We cleared rock after rock, and shot past fall after fall, our little boat seeming to play with the cataract. We became flushed with success and familiar with the danger; and, yielding to the excitement of the occasion, broke forth together into a Canadian boat-song. Singing, or rather shouting, we dashed along; and were, I believe, in the midst of a chorus when the boat struck a concealed rock immediately at the foot of the fall, which whirled her over in an instant. Three of my men could not swim, and my first feeling was to assist them, and save some of our effects; but a sharp concussion or two convinced me that I had not yet saved myself. A few strokes brought me into an eddy, and I landed on a pile of rocks on the left side. Looking around, I saw that Preuss had gained the same shore on the same side, about twenty yards below; and a little climbing and swimming soon brought him to my side. On the opposite side, against the wall, lay the boat, bottom up; and Lambert was in the act of saving Descoteaux, whom he had grasped by the hair, and who could not swim.... For a hundred yards below, the current was covered with floating books and boxes, bales of blankets, and scattered articles of clothing; and so strong and boiling was the stream that even our heavy instruments, which were all in cases, kept on the surface, and the sextant, circle, and the long black box of the telescope were in view at once.

Yet the party extricated itself better than it might have expected. The boat was righted and taken downstream a mile and a half, where a broad expanse of rock offered a resting place. For this distance, the banks and shallows were searched, and much of the baggage was recovered. One of the men had

² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

clung to Frémont's double-barreled gun. All the registers were found with the exception of one of Frémont's journals, containing his notes upon incidents of travel, topographical descriptions, some scattered astronomical observations, and the barometrical register west of Laramie. Happily, duplicates of his most important barometrical observations were preserved in the other journals. The circle was saved, and a number of blankets. But all the heavier articles—the sextant, telescope, and remaining guns—had sunk beyond recovery; the party was left stripped of every morsel of food, ammunition, and arms, at the mercy of savages and in danger of starvation. It was necessary to push on at once to the men who had gone by land to Goat Island.

The battered boat had to be left behind, for the rocky pass was too narrow to allow egress from the cañon; while the recovered baggage was deposited in a safe spot and left. Climbing slowly to the top of the cañon, the half-naked explorers hurried forward over the rocky ground. Frémont hobbled along on one moccasin, his unprotected foot cut by sharp rocks. The party had to cross the winding river repeatedly, sometimes fording it and sometimes swimming, and to climb the ridges of two more cañons before, late in the evening, they came within sight of Goat Island. They were soon sitting about a hot fire, eating pieces of buffalo steak roasted at the coals, and telling the story of their adventures.

This catastrophe was a forcible lesson upon the folly of Frémont's precipitancy. The cautious Nicollet would never have permitted him to take such a risk. His impetuosity might have destroyed completely the records of his expedition and given a disastrous check to his career; it might have cost several lives, and, if his group had failed to join the other members of the expedition, would certainly have done so. This instance of rashness was all too characteristic of the man; but fortunately his character had another side, which was amply demonstrated in these three months.

On the whole, Frémont in this expedition showed coolness,

sagacity, and more than once a really remarkable resourcefulness in meeting emergencies. A test of his ingenuity occurred as they were just entering the Wind River Range. In crossing a broad stream, pouring rapidly over a slippery bed of boulders and quartz slabs, where the pack animals fell repeatedly, the horse bearing the barometer struck it against a rock and broke it. It was the only barometer the expedition owned. Since it was indispensable for an accurate measurement of altitudes, its loss seemed a heavy blow. They had brought it a thousand miles, watching over it with anxious solicitude day and night, and now, just as they reached the high Rockies, it was smashed. The men were as dejected as Frémont himself. But they no sooner made camp than he set about trying to repair the catastrophe.

He discovered that while the glass cistern had been broken about midway, no air had found its way into the tube. He had a number of vials of rather thick glass, some of them of the same diameter as the cistern, and, with a rough file from the tool chest, he spent the day slowly endeavoring to cut them to the requisite length. Unfortunately, they all broke. Next morning, having placed the barometer at night out of harm's way in a groove in one of the trees, he began to work upon a different device. Taking a powderhorn which happened to be remarkably translucent, he boiled it, stretched it on a piece of wood to the requisite diameter, and scraped it very thin, until it was almost as clear as glass. Then using some strong glue made from a buffalo's tendons, he fastened the horn firmly in its place on the instrument, and filled it with mercury, properly heated. A piece of skin, secured with thread and glue, furnished a suitable pocket, and the brass cover was screwed into place. After the instrument had been left some hours to dry, Frémont and his companions anxiously tested it. When it was reversed, they had the joy of finding it in perfect order, its indications being almost identical with those it had marked before it was broken. The day was saved.³

³ Frémont, *Memoirs*, p. 141.

Frémont also proved his ability to secure a firm hold upon the confidence of his men. On its outward march the party had divided at the forks of the Platte, the main body under Clement Lambert and Carson going by the regular Oregon Trail route to Fort Laramie, while Frémont with four others proceeded toward the same point by the before-mentioned Fort St. Vrain. When the two detachments joined hands at Fort Laramie they were met by alarming news. This fort, strongly built of adobe and wooden palisades, was maintained by the American Fur Company for its traders and the protection of emigrants along the Oregon Trail. The famous frontiersman, Jim Bridger, had just come down the North Platte trail with a company of traders. He brought word that the Sioux, Blackfeet, and Cheyenne had combined and were on the warpath, and that the route from Laramie to South Pass was very perilous. This news was received with alarm by the voyageurs, and even Carson was so much affected that he made an oral will, which trappers seldom did save in extremity.⁴ Less than a year earlier the Sioux and Cheyenne had fallen upon a party of about sixty whites on the Little Snake, and in the ensuing encounter had killed five, including the leader. These tribes had recently let a party of emigrants led by Fitzpatrick through their country, but had served notice that the path was no longer open, and that any new group found upon it would be destroyed. From all that Frémont could learn, the country ahead was swarming with scattered groups of warriors.

Yet the lieutenant, though Carson believed that the party would almost certainly have a clash if they pushed forward, did not hesitate. Both traders and Indians advised him to wait until the war parties had completed their raids and returned home; but he knew that to stop was in fact almost impossible. It was he who had insisted that the orders for the expedition include South Pass, and he felt he had to go thither. A main purpose of the reconnaissance was to determine the best points

⁴ Compare F. S. Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 71.

at which to plant forts for protection against Indians, and it would hardly do to refuse to face the Indians in the field. There was an Oregon caravan not far ahead of Frémont, and if it was in trouble his duty was to follow at once. Moreover, Frémont well knew with what sneers he would be greeted in the East by West Point men if he returned confessing that an Indian scare had forced him to abbreviate his plans. He was a newcomer in the Army, and very decidedly upon his mettle. If he flinched, the regular officers would never cease reminding him that he had allowed a trail—a settler's trail at that—to be closed in his face.

As a measure of precaution, Frémont engaged an interpreter, one of the fur traders of the region, named Joseph Bissonette, who, if they came in contact with the Indians, would be able to explain that the purposes of the expedition were purely scientific. Bissonette told him that the chief danger would lie in being attacked before the savages knew who they really were. Then, the equipment repaired and everything ready for a start, the lieutenant called his men about him at evening and told them he was determined to push forward at dawn the next day; that they were well armed and accustomed to the country; and that they had known on the Missouri that the Indians were restless, and ought not to object now to the peril. However, he wanted no undependable followers, and those who were apprehensive might drop out. A few days before, the voyageurs had been complaining of the lack of excitement: "*Il n'y aura pas de vie pour nous.*" Now only one man had the effrontery to come forward and accept the permission to retreat, and Frémont, after asking some questions to expose him to the ridicule of the others, let him go.

The two youths, Randolph Benton and Henry Brant, were reluctantly left at the fort—Randolph's high spirits had made him a general favorite—for it was unjustifiable to risk their lives. As it turned out, the party sighted few Indians on the Sweetwater Trail, and none hostile enough to contest their passage. The episode gave Frémont added prestige. Carson's

biographer has aptly characterized him as he must have appeared at this time to the mountain-men: ⁵

A states-bred man but a man who showed trail experience; something of the dandy but nothing of the popinjay; a captain in command but prompt to fall to with the best of them; a captain and a comrade in one—a leader with the enthusiasm of a greenhorn, but without the greenhorn's blatant ignorance.

Kit Carson's task as guide was finished when the expedition turned back from the Wind River Range, and he did not complete the circuit with Frémont. The party of trappers and hunters for which he had sent to Taos did not actually join the explorers. They were never engaged as part of Frémont's company; they had to hunt and trap somewhere, and Carson simply wished to have them near him in the event of trouble with the Indians. Leaving Taos late in June with laden pack-horses, they pushed northeast up the Indian trail to Fort Laramie; their road running through Pueblo, a Mexican village of a few adobe houses, past the site of the present city of Colorado Springs, over the site of Denver, then a virgin wilderness without even a hut or a tent, and on to their destination. Keeping near Frémont on the Sweetwater, they crossed to the western side of the Rockies, and were there joined by Kit Carson at a spot thirty miles from the Atlantic and Pacific Springs. With Carson as leader, they then returned to Taos with their pelts for the winter. But before the separation took place, Frémont and Carson had agreed that the latter was, if possible, to act as guide for a second expedition the next year, 1843.

The final stages of Frémont's return trip exhibited his tenacity and his skilful use of the experience gained with Nicollet and Sibley. Even after the wreck of the rubber boat he did not give up his wish to descend the Platte by water. There was little wood, but he did not need it. Several buffalo bulls were killed and skinned; the four best hides were sewn together

⁵ E. L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, pp. 331, 332.

with buffalo sinews, and this tough fabric was stretched over a framework of river willows. Then the seams were caulked with a glue made of ashes and tallow, and the vessel was left in the hot sun till the drying skins drew taut. The result was a broad shallow "bull boat," such as trappers often used, eight feet long and almost wide enough for a man to lie down in. It drew, when Frémont, Preuss, and two others took up the paddles, only four inches. Unfortunately, the Platte did not offer four inches. For three or four miles the men tugged and pushed their ungainly craft over sandy shallows, and finally in discouragement left it on a sandbar. They continued afoot, and on September 18th reached the Grand Island; four days later, they bought some green vegetables from friendly Pawnees engaged in harvesting their gardens. On September 30th, they sighted the yellow Missouri; and on October 1st, Frémont, rising long before daybreak, heard with a feeling of inexpressible pleasure the mellow tinkle of cowbells from farms on the opposite side of the river. He was back on the edge of civilization.

What Frémont had accomplished was best summarized by his friend Linn a little later in a speech to the Senate. After describing how he had followed the Platte and Sweetwater, the Missourian remarked: ⁶

He reached the [South] Pass on the 8th of August, and describes it as a low and wide depression of the mountains, where the ascent is as easy as the hill on which this Capitol stands, and where a plainly beaten wagon road leads to the Oregon through the valley of Lewis's River, a fork of the Columbia. He went through the Pass, and saw the headwaters of the Colorado, of the Gulf of California....

Linn, accepting the story of the "loftiest peak" of the Rockies, briefly dilated on it, and then proceeded:

From that ultimate point he returned by the valley of the Great Platte, following the stream in its whole course, and solving all

⁶ Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, 478; *Cong. Globe*, 2d Sess., 27th Cong.

questions in relation to its navigability, and the character of the country through which it flows.

He added that the use of the eight mule-drawn carts proved the facility of traveling in this region; that herds of buffalo had given food to the men, the short-grass to the horses and mules; and that the fact that two boys, one only twelve, accompanied the expedition, proved that whole families could traverse the country without risk. The expedition had done something to encourage Oregon migration; it would do still more when Frémont's report was published.

IX

The First Report

TARRYING briefly in St. Louis to sell what remained of his equipment, Frémont left by steamboat on the eighteenth, and reported to Colonel Abert in Washington on the twenty-ninth. He had special reason for haste. A few days after he arrived Jessie gave birth to a daughter. Spreading over her bed a ragged, wind-whipped flag, he told her proudly: "This flag was raised over the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains; I have brought it to you."¹

He found the Benton household under a cloud which even the advent of the new baby, and Jessie's happiness in his return tanned and rugged, could not dispel. Mrs. Benton shortly after Frémont's departure had suffered a stroke of paralysis. Jessie believed that it had been caused by her mother's insistence upon old-fashioned medical practice, for even when she had nothing worse than a sick-headache, Mrs. Benton would insist, despite the Senator's opposition, upon being bled. Repeated use of the lance had converted this once-vigorous woman, after only twenty years of marriage, into an emaciated wreck, who talked but slowly and imperfectly, and whose mind had obviously been impaired. The Senator, Jessie wrote later, would come in buoyantly every day, impressed by the doctor's command that he remain cheerful, would keep up appearances for a time, and then would steal away to his room to give way to overpowering grief. His incessant care of the invalid, destined to live a dozen years longer, was touching to watch. Family loyalty and affection were one of the strongest elements in his character, and his display of them recalls McKinley's

¹ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

devotion to his invalid wife. Once the Senator was talking with important political visitors when Mrs. Benton appeared at the door, her dress disordered and her faculties plainly wandering. Without hesitation, he hastened to her with all his characteristic dignity, brought her to his guests, and introduced her with an air of pride.

For Frémont the immediate task was his report, and he had no time for a vacation. A plan for a second and longer expedition was probably being discussed by Benton and the other expansionists soon after his return; and if he were to set out in the spring, he must make haste. It is evident that both he and Benton envisaged a document that could be widely circulated and read. No doubt both remembered the interest excited by Irving's *Captain Bonneville* and *Astoria*. At any rate, during the fall and winter of 1842-43 Frémont and his wife achieved what had never been done before in a government report upon the West. We have said that it was necessary not only to explore the trans-Missouri areas, not only to survey and map the main westward routes, but to describe the country. A contribution to that task had been made, with considerable authority but no literary skill whatever, by the men who kept journals under Lewis and Clark. The volumes by Pike, the record of Long's explorations (Edwin James's *Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, 1823*), and Featherstonhaugh's report were of mediocre quality. Irving's books showed great literary talent but possessed little scientific accuracy. It was now Frémont's aim to combine a high degree of authority with a high degree of literary finish—an aim in which he perfectly succeeded. This was only part of his winter's work. He and Preuss had to prepare a map of their route, and at Benton's suggestion determined to make it a guide-book in atlas form; that is, a series of detailed maps representing each a day's journey toward the Oregon country. Such a guide-book, with the camp-sites affording water, wood, and grass clearly indicated, would be invaluable to emigrants. Many hundreds of specimens in botany and zoölogy had to be classified, but most

of this task Frémont was able to assign to the botanist, John Torrey, who had done the same service for Nicolle.

An unnecessary mystery has been made of the division of credit for this report between Frémont and his wife. Some writers give much of the praise for its literary sparkle to Jessie, who later proved herself in many volumes a finished and vivid writer. But while her collaboration was invaluable, no one who reads the document carefully can doubt that it is nine-tenths his. It is close-packed with factual information which he alone could supply, and which determines its whole form and flavor. What she did for him was simple. He had a natural command of graphic English, and even documents which he later produced under unfavorable conditions, such as his long letter from Taos after the wreck of his fourth expedition, show force and lucidity. But writing alone, he found that he lacked facility and grace. In beginning his report he spent some days of mental anguish, which Jessie had tactfully described:² "The horse-back life, the sleep in the open air, had unfitted Mr. Frémont for the indoor work of writing—and second lieutenants cannot indulge in secretaries. After a series of hemorrhages from the nose and head had convinced him that he must give up trying to write his report, I was let to try and thus slid into my most happy life-work." His own statement is significant: "I write more easily by dictation. Writing myself I have too much time to think and dwell upon words as well as ideas." What Jessie taught her husband was simply this—that many a man who is awkward and dull when he writes is expressive and interesting when he dictates. Frémont dictated, Jessie copied, and all went well. Beyond question she added elegant touches and gave variety to his vocabulary, but the reports are close-knit transcripts of his own ideas and experience, and resemble nothing that Jessie ever wrote.

The work, carried forward every morning in the Benton home on C Street, was done under sustained pressure. Jessie took her desk daily at nine, and never left it till one, writing

² Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

madly to follow her husband's dictation. He paced the room, notes in hand, as he talked. "I soon learned that I could not make a restless motion," writes Jessie; "it was hard, but that was lost in the great joy of being useful to him, and so, swiftly, the report of the first expedition was written." No doubt her eager questioning, her insistence upon concrete detail touched his poetic vein, and enabled him to give perspective and coloring to his picture; no doubt also her acquaintance with English literature often suggested a superior phrasing. It was a true collaboration of two quick and sympathetic minds, but the content is wholly Frémont's. When Jessie wrote the last sentence she exclaimed with joyous emotion: "I have not put to paper one half the beauty and truth you have shown me, but I have done the best I could, my darling." Then followed the proof correction, which she mastered, "and behold! Mr. Frémont's first book!" A compact brochure, it had a value and interest which made his reputation.³

Three qualities in this and Frémont's later reports, taken in combination, give them distinction. The first is the fullness and precision of their information on every matter important to emigrants. They answered satisfactorily the essential questions as to topography, terrain, water, soils, vegetation, wild life, temperature, and weather. The second is the skill with which, while doing this, they also responded to the curiosity of Americans upon more general sights and experiences in the West. An army engineer or closet scientist, after furnishing precise but dull information on roads, plants, and climate, would have stopped. Frémont does much more. Take a few pages from the report on this first expedition after it reached Fort Laramie on July 13, 1842. We find a description of this heavy adobe fort, with tower and bastions; of the mode of trading with Indians for pelts; of the superiority of Indian buffalo-skin lodges to American tents; of the impediments of

³ Frémont's *Report* was first issued (Washington, 1843) in a volume of 207 pages, but was reprinted by George H. Derby & Co. in 1849 in 122 pages; other publishers also brought it out. Citations hereafter made will be from the Derby edition as that preserved in the Frémont papers.

the artemisia bushes (sage-brush) to travel; of the method of making a cache; of the fondness of grizzlies for wild cherries; of the Indian use of bread-root (*Psoralea esculenta*); of the straits of the Oglallah Sioux, their horses starved to death by drought; of the habits and palatability of mountain sheep; of the appearance of Rock Independence—an isolated granite mass, two-fifths of a mile long and forty feet high, on which numerous travelers had carved their names; of the cañons of the Sweetwater. So the narrative runs on, giving that miscellaneous as well as utilitarian information which Americans then desired.

All this informational breadth would have been far less effective but for the third quality of the reports, the warm subjective feeling which charged them. The first document was a young man's work, written in the first person, and filled with zest and enthusiasm, with Frémont's glowing love of novelty and adventure. Having Jessie's curiosity to spur him on, he felt no false inhibitions in showing that the romance, peril, and novelty of the trip had been the very wine of life to him. Where a professional soldier would have been flat and pedantic, he was eloquent. He recalled the party's thrill of alarm when some distant elk were taken for Indians: "Mounted on a fine horse, without a saddle, and scouring bareheaded over the prairie, Kit was one of the finest pictures of a horseman I have ever seen." He put contagious excitement into his description of the chase: "My horse was a trained hunter, famous in the West under the name of Proveau; and, with his eyes flashing and the foam flying from his mouth, sprang on after the cow like a tiger." He found something glorious in the first view of buffalo: ⁴

In the sight of such a mass of life, the traveller feels a strange emotion of grandeur. We had heard from the distance a dull and confused murmuring, and, when we came in view of their dark masses, there was not one among us who did not feel his heart beat quicker. It was the early part of the day, when the herds were feeding; and everywhere they were in motion. Here and there a

⁴ Frémont, *Report*, p. 21.

huge old bull was rolling in the grass, and clouds of dust rose in the air from various parts of the bands, each the scene of some obstinate fight. Indians and buffalo were the poetry and life of the prairie, and our camp was full of their exhilaration.

Parkman later might have been proud of this imaginative last sentence, a sentence such as had never before appeared in an official report. But numerous other passages showed the same poetic ardor; for example, his description of an Indian buffalo-hunt:

The clouds of dust soon covered the whole scene, preventing us from having any but an occasional view....We were too far to hear the report of the guns, or any sound; and at every instant, through the clouds of dust, which the sun made luminous, we could see for a moment two or three buffalo dashing along, and close behind them an Indian with his long spear, or other weapon, and instantly again they disappeared. The apparent silence, and the dimly seen figures flitting by with such rapidity, gave it a kind of dreamy effect, and seemed more like a picture than a scene of real life.

Another and even better extract offers us a glimpse of the knightly quality of Frémont as he rode on his westward quest. He had reached a village of the Cheyenne and Arapahoe:

As we rode along, I remarked near some of the lodges a kind of tripod frame, formed of three slender poles of birch, scraped very clean, to which were affixed the shield and spear, with some other weapons of a chief. All were scrupulously clean, the spearhead was burnished bright, and the shield white and stainless. It reminded me of the days of feudal chivalry; and when, as I rode by, I yielded to the passing impulse, and touched one of the spotless shields with the muzzle of my gun, I almost expected a grim warrior to start from the lodge and resent my challenge.

His quick sense of natural beauty, which remained with him through life, lends constant charm to these pages. He was pleased by the sunflowers which yellowed the Kansas prairies,

and the carpets of smaller blossoms in the river bottoms farther west. The Platte where it issues from the Black Hills (the Laramie Mountains), with overhanging precipices of red sandstone, crowned by green woods three or four hundred feet above the stream, seemed to him of a striking beauty. But it was over the Alpine magnificence of the Wind River chain that he waxed most enthusiastic. The morning of August 10th had found the party encamped on a little tributary of the Green River, which ran swiftly over a bed of granite, milky quartz, and sand. Just in front rose a mountain wall two thousand feet in height, the bottom wrapped in morning fog, and the top gilded by the first rays of the sun. Farther in the distance loomed the dim forms of high peaks. Then as the sun rose above the wall, it brought a magical change. The whole valley, with its green pines, foaming stream, and many-colored rocks burst into color, while the crests brightened above it like domes and pinnacles of silver. They took up their march, traversing long ridges of granite-strewn ground, and after winding up a long gorge, came upon a delightful lake set like a jewel in the mountains. "Here," writes Frémont, "a view of the utmost magnificence and grandeur burst upon our eyes. With nothing between us and their feet to lessen the effect of the whole height, a grand bed of snow-capped mountains rose before us, pile upon pile, glowing in the bright light of the August day. Immediately below them lay the lake, between two ridges, covered with dark pines which swept down from the main chain to the spot where we stood. Here, where the lake glittered in the open sunlight, its banks of yellow sand and the light foliage of aspen groves contrasted well with the gloomy pines."

The human element bulked large in this first report, and was offered with the same frank informality. No enlivening touch was omitted. Thus Frémont mentioned some Yankee trappers on the Platte: "All had their squaws with them, and I was really surprised at the number of little fat, buffalo-fed Indian boys that were tumbling about the camp, all apparently of the same age, about three or four years old." He spoke of

"tobacco, that sine qua non of a voyageur." He described a supper of dog meat in an Indian village:

The dog was in a large pot over the fire, in the middle of the lodge, and immediately on arrival was dished up in large wooden bowls, one of which was handed to each. The flesh appeared very glutinous, with something of the flavor and appearance of mutton. Feeling something move behind me, I looked around, and found that I had taken my seat among a litter of fat young puppies. Had I been nice in such matters, the prejudices of civilization might have interfered with my tranquillity; but fortunately, I am not of delicate nerves, and continued quietly to enjoy and empty my platter.

Forts St. Vrain and Laramie were succinctly described; the operations of the fur trade were analyzed, with some real sympathy for the Indians ruined by the liquor traffic. At Fort Laramie, Frémont found that the traders of the American Fur Company annually received great piles of buffalo robes which they stacked up like cordwood, giving the savages in exchange blankets, calico, guns, ammunition, tobacco, cheap gew-gaws, and drink. The general policy of the Company was firmly opposed to the introduction of spirits. But at a time when the country was well supplied with alcohol, when a keg of it would purchase from an Indian his furs, his lodge, his horses, and even his wife, and when any vagabond who owned a mule could go to an Indian village and out-trade the company, it was impossible for the Company wholly to avoid the use of liquor. Unlicensed traders sold their spirits at \$36 a gallon:

The difference between the regular trader and the *coureur des bois* (as the French call the itinerant or peddling trader) with respect to the sale of spirits, is here, as it has always been, fixed and permanent, and growing out of the nature of their trade. The regular trader looks ahead and has an interest in the preservation of the Indians...; the *coureur des bois* has no permanent interest, and gets what he can, and for what he can.

Frémont mentions a plague of locusts which had destroyed the grass west of Laramie; he describes the Indian process of

jerking buffalo meat. Even in speaking of the top of Frémont Peak he added a humanizing touch:

Here, on the summit, where the stillness was absolute, unbroken by any sound, and solitude complete, we thought ourselves beyond the region of animated life; but while we were sitting on the rock, a solitary bee (*bromus*, the humble-bee) came winging his flight from the eastern valley, and lit on the knee of one of the men. It was a strange place, the icy rock and the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, for a lover of warm sunshine and flowers; and we pleased ourselves with the idea that he was the first of his species to cross the mountain barrier—a solitary pioneer to foretell the advance of civilization.

Unquestionably the most important lesson taught by the report was its demonstration that the plains between the Missouri and the foothills of the Rockies were not arid but fertile—that the Great American Desert had no existence in this region. Frémont showed that they afforded nutritious grass for horses and other live stock; that for some hundreds of miles the country was highly attractive in its alternations of woodland and prairie; and that the soil of the Platte Valley was rich. There had been no scientific report upon this strip since Major Stephen Long's army expedition in 1820, and Long's observations had been superficial and unfavorable. Writing of the country he traversed in a circuit of the Platte, the Rocky Mountain foothills, and the Arkansas, Long had said, "I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence." This of what are now the great farming states of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma! Frémont's report was the first sharp thrust at the popular delusion that an American Sahara lay in regions which are now the very granary of the United States—a delusion, however, that persisted till the gold rush of '49 finally slew it.

His favorable report was of immediate importance to the

expansionist Senators. During 1842, Elijah White's party of about one hundred and twenty emigrants (the exact number is still unsettled), perhaps spurred on by newspaper accounts of Oregon, had made the long pilgrimage from Missouri to the Columbia Valley. The great migration of 1843, which included the Burnett and Applegate families of Missouri, both well-known to Benton, was shortly to set out. Yet President Polk continued to favor a policy of delay, though to the anxious western congressmen this seemed merely playing into the hands of Great Britain. The President's annual message of December, 1842, suggested that it would be improper to grant any titles of land to Oregon emigrants until "the respective claims of the two governments should be settled." At the same time the Administration, preparing for debate upon the Ashburton Treaty regarding the northeast boundary, sounded out the Missouri Senators upon a suggestion, emanating from the negotiators of the Treaty, for a "conventional division line," to run along the north bank of the Columbia; thus surrendering most of what is now the state of Washington to the British. The resentment of the western group in Congress was instant. Senator Linn, taking the lead against the President, introduced a bill which he and Benton believed would promote settlement. It provided that the President should erect a series of forts along the Oregon route to the Rockies, and one at the mouth of the Columbia; that every adult settler should be given 640 acres of Oregon land, with an additional quarter section for his wife and every child; and that American courts should be set up in the Oregon country, leaving British offenders to British jurisdiction. Calhoun and McDuffie of South Carolina led the opposition to the bill, which after passing the Senate twenty-four to twenty-two, was stifled in the House. But the effect that Benton and Linn intended was fully accomplished. The impression was established that a large and growing element in Congress stood ready to support those who entered Oregon, and that colonization of the far-off region was a patriotic duty. Benton declared that he looked forward to the day when we should

have "thirty or forty thousand rifles beyond the Rocky Mountains" as our "negotiators."

While the Senate debate on Oregon was proceeding, Frémont put the finishing touches to his report and filed it with the War Department. As we have seen, Senator Linn was waiting to give it due advertisement. A motion was passed calling upon the Secretary of War to transmit it to the Senate, and Linn then offered a resolution that it be printed for Congress, with a thousand extra copies for public distribution. The printing was ordered and the report was no sooner in type than the newspapers seized upon it.

X

The Second Expedition: Outward Bound

BENTON informs us that Frémont's first expedition was "barely finished" before he "sought and obtained orders for a second one"; the initiative coming from Benton, Linn, and the young explorer, not from the Administration.¹ These orders were from the War Department through Colonel Abert, chief of the Topographical Engineers. They instructed him to carry his explorations westward into the Anglo-American territory of Oregon; or, to be precise, "to connect the reconnaissance of 1842 with the surveys of Commander Wilkes on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, so as to give a connected survey of the interior of our continent." Lieutenant Charles Wilkes in his famous exploring expedition of 1838-42 (which ended in his court-martial), had surveyed much of the west coast of the United States, including San Francisco Bay, the Sacramento, and the Columbia. The main object of Frémont's tour was to do for the whole of the Oregon Trail what he had already done for the stretch to South Pass. As a matter of fact, he was destined to accomplish more than even the sanguine western expansionists could have expected. His exploration finally embraced not only Oregon, but parts of Utah, Nevada, and California; it resulted in advertising the fertility of the Great Salt Lake region as well as the Columbia Valley; it dispelled some of the mystery still clinging about the Great Basin between the Rockies and Sierras; and it culminated in a memorable passage across snow-choked ranges into the smiling lap of springtime California.

¹ Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years View*, II, p. 477.

Already, as we have seen, the tide of westward colonization was flowing strongly. This was the year of the "great migration" to Oregon, when nearly nine hundred men, women, and children, assembling at Independence, Missouri, crossed the plains in a body to settle in the Columbia Valley. The stream was to rise steadily, about fourteen hundred crossing in 1844, and about three thousand in 1845. Though Frémont's expeditions strongly encouraged the movement, it would have taken place with not greatly diminished volume had he never made a start. Yet his work was to be of memorable utility none the less. He was expected to approach the South Pass by a different route, push on west, and examine the broad region south of the Columbia, lying between the Rockies, the Pacific, and California. His tour, it was hoped, would furnish a connected scientific description of much of the Pacific Northwest, dispel any idea that the Oregon journey was terrifyingly difficult, and emphasize the attractions of the Columbia. Actually, as we have said, it did much else. It brought California more vividly into the American consciousness than ever before, so that its attractions caught the imagination of tens of thousands. The first expedition had exploded the legend of a Great American Desert; the second disclosed to multitudes a shining new land of flowers, sunshine, and wealth.

Congress broke up at the beginning of March, 1843, and the Benton-Frémont household broke up with it. The Senator hurried west to St. Louis alone. Frémont, accompanied by Preuss, went to New York to buy his instruments, and then traveled by rail and steamboat to St. Louis. For Jessie, her ailing mother, and the baby, a private stage or "accommodation" was provided and packed with comforts. These three set out over the National Road, moving slowly with many stops for rest; and taking the boat at Wheeling, reached St. Louis in about a fortnight. All were reunited at the Brant mansion, but only briefly, Benton then ranging the state to mend his political fences, and Frémont, after hiring men and buying mules, proceeding to the Kaw or Kansas (Westport) Landing,

the site of present-day Kansas City, to make his final preparations. He was at this point by the middle of May, 1843.

Never had an American exploring expedition, private or governmental, been better fitted out than this second body. His force comprised thirty-nine men, not counting supernumeraries, most of them being French-Canadians and Creoles, though a number of American names (White, Campbell, Lee, and so on) occur.² Half a dozen of them, including Basil Lajeunesse, always gay, energetic, and a great favorite, were voyageurs who had been with the first expedition. A free Negro of eighteen, Jacob Dodson, who was devoted to the Benton family, went along—his black visage destined to excite great curiosity among the Indians. Agreeably to Abert's instructions, Theodore Talbot of Washington was taken with them for training, and kept a journal which offers an informal record of some value. Another interesting figure attached to the expedition was the twenty-year-old William Gilpin of St. Louis, a brilliant young man who had already passed through many adventures. He had been page to Andrew Jackson, cadet at West Point, second lieutenant of dragoons in the Seminole War, and editor of the St. Louis *Argus*, a Benton paper of extreme expansionist views.³ For guide, since Carson did not join him until he reached what is now Pueblo, Colorado, Frémont engaged Thomas Fitzpatrick or "Broken-Hand," not only one of the most experienced trappers of the Rockies, but a man of exceptional intellect and character. He also hired his old friend Louis Zindel, the Prussian veteran who had been with Nicollet and knew so much about explosives and rockets. Two stalwart Delaware Indians, father and son, were taken as hunters.

The party, rather crippled at the outset by a shortage of animals, had a dozen large carts, each drawn by two mules, and a light covered wagon for the scientific instruments. These instruments were Frémont's pride. They included a fine re-

² For the full list of names see Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 169.

³ Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 352. For a fervent tribute to Gilpin see W. E. Connolley, *Kansas Historical Society Collections*, Vol. X, p. 113.

fracting telescope, two pocket chronometers, two sextants, a reflecting circle, a syphon barometer and cistern barometer, half a dozen thermometers, and an assortment of compasses. Packed with the tents were a large supply of gifts for Indians, and a rubber boat, not so well made as the one taken on the first expedition. Their provisions included an abundance of flour, rice, sugar, and coffee, while for meat they depended upon game. The party was armed with a really superior weapon, the Hall breech-loading rifled carbine, a piece fired by flintlock, but using ready-fixed ball-and-powder cartridges, and susceptible of rapid reloading. We shall meet the Hall carbine again in Frémont's Civil War days.

But the most interesting part of the equipment was a howitzer cannon firing a twelve-pound ball. Frémont had applied to Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, commanding the Third Military Division, for this piece from the St. Louis arsenal. Perhaps Zindel had suggested taking it, perhaps Benton. Cannon were not unknown as weapons against Indians, for General William H. Ashley had fitted out a supply-train with a four-pounder, while Jedediah Smith had taken one on the last trip of his life. The general feeling of frontiersmen was that they were worse than useless, but Frémont doubtless believed that one of them might strike terror to an overwhelming war-party of Indians.

Kaw Landing in these May days of 1843 was a busy place. Crowds of men, including many hundreds of emigrants to Oregon or California, fur traders, trappers, and freighters down the Santa Fé Trail, were there, and hundreds more were coming. The facilities of the little settlement were taxed to the utmost. Long lines of horses and mules, switching their tails against the flies, stood eating grain out of rough troughs made by tying sacking to lines of stakes. The swearing of teamsters, the shouts of roustabouts, the bellowing of oxen, made the steep sides of the bluff echo.⁴ Baggage was piled high on the shore.

⁴ The scene is vividly described in the MS Journal of Theodore Talbot, Library of Congress.

Every few days a steamboat pulled in with a hoarse musical roar, or dropped downstream. Amid the bustle, Frémont's men scurried about, seeking the aid of a blacksmith here, loading goods into the carts there, making purchases in the stores which, crude and small, were doing a business that pretentious eastern shops might envy. We can imagine the bristly blond head of Preuss bobbing everywhere, the white locks of Fitzpatrick—whose hair had suddenly turned gray when, beset by Blackfeet in the mountains, he had lost every companion and had been closely hunted among the rocks for days—streaming in the wind. While they were thus busy, suddenly Frémont received from his wife a letter which urged him to set out immediately. Giving no reason, but declaring that haste was imperative, it commanded him to go on to Bent's Fort instantly.

Frémont knew that there must be good reason for this urgency. It was only eleven days since he had reached Kaw Landing, but he gave the word, and next morning the teamsters cracked their whips over the straining mules, while he galloped ahead with Fitzpatrick and Preuss. They proceeded only four miles over the rolling prairie, for a nasty rain was falling, and some of the green animals were balky; but they camped safely out of sight of the village.

The sending of this peremptory message by Jessie is an incident which reveals much as to her character. She was so much his aide that he had asked her to open all mail and forward only what related to the expedition. One day there came a long official envelop marked "Topographical Corps," and reading it, she dropped it to her lap in consternation. It was an order directing Frémont to return at once to Washington and explain why he had taken a cannon. His was a peaceful scientific survey, wrote Colonel Abert, and not a trip requiring a howitzer. Meanwhile, another officer would be sent west to take charge of his men. Jessie's temper instantly blazed up. She writes: ⁵

⁵ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

Fancy his fine picked men, "every man a captain in himself," as Carson once said to me, under the line-and-rule control of an ordinary officer. But here intuition came to my aid. Behind the chief of that Bureau (Colonel Abert), who was a placid, indolent man, I saw his son-in-law who was an envious, discontented person. I ought to say here that the Report had given immediate fame to Mr. Frémont—then why not the same to another officer?

I felt the whole situation in a flash, and met it—as I saw right. I had been too much a part of the whole plan for the expeditions to put them in peril now—and I alone could act. Fortunately my father was off in the State attending to his political affairs. I did what I have always since been glad to remember. First I told no one. I knew that one of the men engaged, a French Canadian named De Rosier, had been permitted to remain in St. Louis on account of his wife's health, gaining for her the month the party were at Kaw Landing with Mr. Frémont. Now I sent for De Rosier.

Mrs. Frémont was doubtless mistaken in attributing the order to jealousy. The Washington authorities rightly objected to giving a scientific expedition the appearance of a military reconnaissance. Our relations with Great Britain and Mexico were so delicate that it was improper to march with a cannon into debatable or foreign territory. That weapon, in the hands of the impulsive Frémont, might cause an international incident. But the determined Jessie gave De Rosier his orders: ⁶

I told him an important letter had come for the Captain, and I wanted it delivered without loss of time. I had to send him, for I thought he would not return. "How long will you need to get ready?" "The time to get my horse." "Say nothing of this, De Rosier," I said, "but you going up by land know how to cut off the bends in the river, and can save the time the mail boat will have to lose lying at anchor by night on account of the river fogs." He suggested taking a brother along—"two horses travel together better, and he will bring back a letter from the Captain." You see I was afraid the order had been sent in duplicate, and might, even

⁶ *Ibid.*, but in her article "The Origin of the Frémont Explorations," *Century Magazine*, Vol. XIX, New Series (1890-91), p. 768ff., Jessie says that she sent the message by Basil Lajeunesse, "who was to join him with the last things."

with the detentions from fogs and snags, yet overtake Mr. Frémont. It was in the blessed day before telegrams, and character counted for something then, and I was only eighteen, an age when one takes risks willingly. It was about 400 miles to Kaw Landing as the crow flies. So I wrote urging him not to lose a day but start at once on my letter....

In a marvelously short time De Rosier's brother was back with the letter. "Good-bye," said my captain, "I trust, and *go*." Nothing was asked.

As soon as she received Frémont's announcement of his start, Jessie wrote Colonel Abert informing him of her action. She declared that he had sent his order without fully understanding the situation, that Frémont's party needed to be well-armed to pass through the hostile Blackfeet and other tribes, and that she had therefore suppressed his despatch. When Benton returned from his fence-mending, he sent Abert a letter accepting full responsibility for Jessie's step. Indeed, he did more than this, for he tells us that he felt outraged when he heard of the attempt to recall Frémont. He wrote the War Department, as he says, "condemning the recall, repulsing the reprimand which had been lavished upon Frémont, and demanding a court-martial for him when he should return." No doubt it was a characteristically fiery, pompous letter, for he shared Jessie's suspicion that an attempt had been made to set the lieutenant aside in favor of some West Pointer. Dislike of West Point, belief that the graduates were jealous of any one who came into the service by other channels, was strongly fixed in the chairman of the Senate Military Committee, himself an old soldier. The good-natured Abert probably felt no resentment, and at any rate seems never to have replied to Jessie or her father. Doubtless he thought it best, since Frémont was beyond recall, to accept the situation and not arouse the antagonism of men so powerful as Benton and Linn.

The cannon was really of small importance, though such good authority as E. L. Sabin concludes that "it paid for itself

in lending morale." It never fired a shot; at one point it apparently helped avert a threatened Indian attack, though the attack could probably have been beaten off without it; and at last it was abandoned on the foothills southeast of Lake Tahoe, on the Nevada-California border.⁷ To her dying day, Mrs. Frémont took pride in her quick, decisive action. Unquestionably it was justified if, as she believed, the Washington authorities meant to make Frémont's recall final and turn his expedition over to another officer. His taking the cannon did not justify such drastic action; no other officer was so well fitted to head an exploring expedition; and he was, of course, better trusted by the expansionists than any one else. Jessie, it must be remembered, had been the confidante of Benton and Frémont, had listened to their discussions with such Westerners as Linn, Dodge of Iowa, Smith of Indiana, and Young of Illinois, and understood perfectly the belief of this group that manifest destiny would soon make Oregon and California part of the United States. She knew what hopes her father pinned to the expedition as a means of furthering the acquisition of the Pacific Slope; she doubtless knew that Frémont meant to enter California as well as Oregon. As she wrote long afterward, she feared that his recall "would make delays which would involve the overthrow of great plans."

The one unhappy consequence of the affair became visible four years later. It lent strength to the view among professional army men that Frémont, a political favorite, headstrong and impulsive, failed to appreciate the value of discipline and obedience. It placed a blemish of insubordination upon his conduct. When later he came into conflict with other officers upon an issue of obedience to his superiors, the episode was remembered to his discredit; and nobody remembered it more clearly than the commander in St. Louis in 1843, Colonel S. W. Kearny.

⁷ The expert judgment of F. S. Dellenbaugh in *Frémont and '49*, p. 110, is that the same weight in dried beans would have been more valuable to the party.

Thus started prematurely, the expedition waited on the prairies one day, May 30th, while some members rode back to the settlement for the missing parts of their equipment; then, on the thirty-first, the journey was resumed in company with several emigrant wagons. These wagons, under the direction of J. B. Chiles of Missouri, were bound to the Sacramento, and were filled with provisions, furniture, and farm implements, including the complete machinery for a sawmill which he intended to erect in Napa Valley. There was no question now of the scope and vigor of the westward movement. As the expedition moved out along the Santa Fé Trail, Frémont saw trains of wagons far to the front and others stretching irregularly to the rear, giving the road an animated and populous appearance. Most of these belonged to the "great migration" of this year to Oregon. On the fourth night out, the missionary Dr. Marcus Whitman camped with the party.⁸ The majority of the season's emigrants had already reached or passed the point where the Santa Fé Trail intersected the Kansas River, but still the stream of late-comers for Oregon and California showed no slackening. The clouds of dust, the gleam of the canvas-topped wagons, were evidence to Frémont that his services were needed immediately.

The labors and adventures of the second expedition between the Missouri and the Dalles of the Columbia, occupying the period between June 1st and November 5, 1843, may be briefly summarized. Frémont at once deviated southward from the route of his first trip, hoping thereby to find a new road to the coast through a country of more genial climate. His plan was, instead of following the Platte to the South Pass in southern Wyoming, to go up the Kansas to the head of the Arkansas River, in what is now central Colorado, and try to discover a new pass through the mountains, far to the south of the gateway most emigrants were using. If he could have found such a corridor as that which railway builders later utilized up the Gunnison Valley into Utah, and proved it suitable for emigrant

⁸ Theodore Talbot, MS Journal, Library of Congress.

use, he would have greatly benefited the country.⁹ He was not destined to succeed in this attempt. He was, however, to bring his party through many new scenes to Oregon and California.

Following the northernmost fork of the Kansas westward, the expedition found itself at first in an arid, unproductive country, where the broad shallow stream, some six hundred yards wide and only a few inches deep, seemed to struggle for its life among yellowish-white quicksands. Crossing this fork, the Republican, toward the northwest, they pushed on over a terrain more and more broken and elevated. Suffering greatly from thirst, they had to drink the half-putrid water of buffalo wallows, an experience that Theodore Talbot describes with amusing disgust:

About eight o'clock we found some ponds in which the water was not quite so nauseous and there we camped. These ponds or wallows are formed by the buffaloes wallowing, an amusement they are very fond of. When any rain falls, it is collected in these places, and here the buffalo come to drink and stand during the heat of the day; adding their own excrements to the already putrescent waters. This compound, warmed for weeks in a blazing sun and alive with animalcules, makes a drink palatable to one suffering from intense thirst. Oh, that some over-dainty connoisseur might taste of it!

A cold rain was welcomed eagerly. On the afternoon of July 1st, when already four thousand feet above sea level, they caught a far glimpse of a faint blue mass penciled against the glowing sky, a mass behind which the sun disappeared. In the clear morning air next day, they could see Long's Peak and the high neighboring mountains, still covered to their bases with gleaming snow. On July 4th, they arrived at St. Vrain's Fort, and joined the veteran fur trader in a feast in honor of the day. Even this wild country was beginning to be thinly settled, for only ten miles away they reached the post of another trader, Mr. Lupton. This post was called Fort Lancaster.

⁹ "In later days the Overland Stage from Denver to Salt Lake, by way of Fort Collins, the Medicine Bow Mountains, and Bridger's Pass, approximated the route that Frémont sought to open"; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 355.

It was coming to look like a well-stocked farm, with hogs, cattle, chickens, and turkeys foraging on the prairie, and a large vegetable garden. Thence the explorers continued southwest, moving parallel with the Rockies, till, on July 9th, they had a momentary glimpse through the clouds of Pike's Peak.

At the point where the Boiling Spring River¹⁰ enters the Arkansas, Frémont, "accidentally" met and reëngaged his old comrade, Kit Carson. There was a village here, where a number of mountaineers, principally Americans, had taken up farming. They had a fine stock of cattle, and obtained what ready money they needed by a desultory Indian trade. Formerly, they had also traded with New Mexico, and had married Spanish women in the Taos Valley, but Mexican decrees had stopped all commercial intercourse. These decrees were a heavy blow to Frémont. He had expected to obtain California mules from Taos to replace the exhausted animals which had dragged his heavy carts for many hundred miles, and to buy new supplies of sugar, flour, and other necessities. Both the mules and provisions were indispensable if he were to continue west over the mountains.

With the advice of Carson, he decided to retrace his steps. Kit was despatched forthwith to Bent's Fort, some seventy-five miles downstream on the Arkansas, with instructions to lay before Charles Bent the imperative needs of the expedition. Fortunately, Bent was able to spare ten good mules, some pack animals, and a quantity of foodstuffs; and taking these with him, Kit traveled to St. Vrain's Fort, where he met Frémont. The explorer now found himself at the foot of the central chain of the Rockies, with the supplies he needed. He knew that he must go almost straight west, for the usual ford of the Green River beyond the mountains lay in that direction. Unfortunately, he could obtain no information upon the character of the passes, and no guide. Thus handicapped, he separated his

¹⁰ This Boiling Spring River is the Fontaine Qui Bouille or Bouit of all early travelers, and the village at its mouth is the Pueblo so frequently mentioned. Preuss found the springs to resemble the Seltzer springs of Germany.

party, for greater speed and safety, into two parties. Fitzpatrick, with the heavy baggage and the majority of the men, was to take the usual emigrant road by way of the mouth of the Laramie River to Fort Hall, the Hudson's Bay Company post on the Snake. With him went Alexander Godey, a hunter esteemed by experts to be "in courage and professional skill a formidable rival to Carson"; a man of whom we shall hear more.

Frémont meanwhile took charge of the other body, a picked group of men, including Kit Carson, Preuss, and Zindel, and set out to cut through the mountains to South Pass by way of the valley of the Cache de la Poudre River. He shortly found himself in one of the wildest and most beautiful parts of the Rockies:¹¹ "Towering mountains rose round about; their sides sometimes dark with forests of pine, and sometimes with lofty precipices, washed by the river; while below, the green river bottom was covered with a wilderness of flowers, their tall spikes rising about our heads as we rode among them."

From this point, their way, even in its smoother portions made "terribly rough" by the dense sage-brush, four to six feet in height, became more and more difficult. They counted themselves lucky in killing many buffalo, and stopped for two days, some two hundred miles from St. Vrain's Fort, to dry large quantities of the meat for future use. But after struggling forward till August 7th, with the terrain growing worse and threatening to make progress with the light carriages wholly impossible, Frémont gave up. From an eminence that afternoon, he tells us, a mountain range became visible in the north, in which he recognized some rocky peaks of the Sweetwater Valley Range; and "determining to abandon any further effort to struggle through this almost impracticable country," he turned back. The party proceeded north-northwest along the east side of the Medicine Bow Range till it reached its northern extremity, then moved west parallel with the present-day line of the Union Pacific, crossed the North Platte, moved up the

¹¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 189, 190.

Sweetwater Valley, and traversed South Pass ahead of Fitzpatrick's division of the expedition. His efforts to find a more southerly route to Oregon and northern California had failed.

After Frémont's party reached the well-marked Oregon Trail on the banks of the Sweetwater River, it found the broad smooth highway, where the constant passage of emigrant wagons had beaten the sage-brush out of existence, a happy exchange for the sharp rocks and tough shrubs through which their horses had been toiling.¹² From this point onward their path was easy and, despite dust and heat, their progress was rapid. They saw many evidences of the stream of travel. Twice within nine days they passed the new-made grave of an emigrant; once they fell in with a stray ox wandering slowly toward his eastern home. When they reached the fertile valley of the Bear River they overtook a single emigrant family, traveling courageously alone with three or four span of fine oxen. Frémont concluded that they were the rear guard of a larger party just ahead, and this proved to be the fact. The next afternoon, crossing a narrow spur, they descended into a lovely valley tributary to the Bear, and came upon a striking scene:

The edge of the wood, for several miles along the river, was dotted with the white covers of emigrant wagons, collected in groups at different camps, where the smokes were rising lazily from the fires, around which the women were occupied in preparing the evening meal, and the children playing in the grass; and herds of cattle, grazing about in the bottom, had an air of quiet security and civilized comfort that made a rare sight to the traveller in such a remote wilderness. In common with all the emigration, they had been reposing for several days in this delightful valley, in order to recruit their animals on its luxuriant pasturage after their long journey, and prepare them for the hard travel along the comparatively sterile banks of the upper Columbia.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 198; *Report, Second Exploring Expedition* (Derby ed., 1849), p. 161.

The Oregon Trail was now a great American highway, as busy as the Cumberland Road a generation earlier.¹³ Frémont did not halt but, driving directly on, left the emigrants in the rear. But next morning, on breaking camp, he found just ahead of him another large party of emigrants leisurely resting, while still farther along the road there was a third. These groups were all parts of the great train of this year, but partly for convenience in travel and partly through factionalism they kept apart. As each camp received him with cheers and eager greetings, again he could feel that America was on the march.

They were now near the Great Salt Lake, and with this as an objective, Frémont accelerated his pace. Some Shoshone Indians supplied him with fresh horses, vegetables, and berries. Despite this, his men were so hard pressed for food that they were glad to make a supper of stewed skunk. Frémont saw, and later described, some natural curiosities—hot springs, red and white hills, an extinct volcano, and so on; but he gave little time to them. On September 6th, he reached the lake, and looking down upon it from a high peninsular butte, experienced one of the memorable moments of his exploring career: ¹⁴

The waters of the inland sea stretched in still and solitary grandeur far beyond the limit of our vision. It was one of the great points of the exploration; and as we looked eagerly over the lake in the first emotions of excited pleasure, I am doubtful if the followers of Balboa felt more enthusiasm when, from the heights of the Andes, they saw for the first time the great Western Ocean. It was certainly a magnificent object, and a noble terminus to this part of our expedition; and to travellers so long shut up among mountain ranges a sudden view over the expanse of silent waters had in it something sublime. Several large islands raised their high rocky heads out of the waves; but whether or not they were timbered was still left to our imagination, as the distance was too great

¹³ Compare J. R. Schafer, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, p. 127ff.

¹⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 228. The Oregon Trail is separated from the Great Salt Lake district by the Wasatch Range. Frémont went up the trail to the end of the range and to Bear Lake, then turning southward to Great Salt Lake.

to determine if the dark hues upon them were woodland or naked rock.

The expectations of the party had been whetted by remarkable tales related of the lake in camp and fort, for old hunters familiar with the region made it the theme of exaggerated stories. Hitherto it had been visited only by them and by trappers searching for beaver streams. Possibly Etienne Provôt was one of the earliest in the vicinity; but its discovery seems to have been made by Jim Bridger in the autumn of 1824. It was Bridger who, stooping for a drink, was astonished to find the water salt, and exclaimed, as he spat it out: "Hell, we are on the shores of the Pacific!" James Clyman and three others are credited with having completely circumnavigated the lake in 1826. But as yet no scientist or any one really interested in geography had visited it; its islands had not been trodden; and no instrumental observations or geographical survey had ever been made in the vicinity. Most men supposed that it had no outlet; but some of Frémont's own voyageurs believed that it contained a terrible whirlpool, through which its waters found a subterreanean way to the Pacific. He tells us that hearing various men talk, "my own mind had become tolerably well filled with their indefinite pictures, and insensibly colored with their romantic descriptions, which, in the pleasure of excitement, I . . . half expected to realize." But he resolved to give the lake its first scientific examination.

Nearly a week of the bracing September weather was devoted to this task. Frémont made a voyage in his india-rubber boat, taking Carson with him, and enjoying the sensation of paddling over water "almost transparently clear, of an extremely beautiful bright-green color." The frail and badly-pasted boat, unfortunately, was kept afloat with great difficulty, and when two of the air cylinders gave way, almost wrecked them in the middle of the lake. They landed on one of the islands, ascended its hills to a rocky eminence eight

hundred feet above the water, and spent the windy night hearing the waves break on the shore like "the roar of an ocean surf." Next day, paddling back, a sudden storm almost cost them their lives. In the course of his wanderings, he made a careful chemical analysis of the water—boiling down a five gallon pail of it, he obtained fourteen pints of fine white salt—and took observations upon the botany and animal life.¹⁵

One of his conclusions was that the region about the lake, and especially to the north of it, in the Bear River Valley, was suitable for a military post and a flourishing civilized settlement, which would be of great strategic value. The bottom lands of the Bear River and the creeks, he pointed out, already formed a natural camping ground for emigrants. Nutritious bunch grass for live stock was abundant; service berries flourished; timber and water were plentiful, and the soil was adapted to grain. As a result of Frémont's description of the Great Salt Lake and Valley, Brigham Young determined four years later to lead the Mormons into this far-off region to set up the State of Deseret. Young did not read Frémont's report with full comprehension; for with reference to comments on Utah Lake, he later charged him with representing the Great Salt Lake as in part salt, and in part fresh, which Frémont had not done at all. He also declared that Frémont had described as a fertile country what was in reality a desert. But despite Young's misconceptions, the Mormons had reason to be grateful to the explorer whose accounts had led them across the Rockies.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carson tells us in his autobiography that Frémont and he ascended the mountain and cut a large cross under a shelving rock. "Next morning started back. Had not left the island more than a league when the clouds commenced gathering for a storm. Our boat leaking wind kept one man continually employed at the bellows. Frémont directed us to pull for our lives, if we did not arrive on shore before the storm commenced we will surely all perish. We done our best and arrived in time to save ourselves. We had not more than landed when the storm commenced and in an hour the waters had risen eight or ten feet." Carson, *Own Story*.

¹⁶ On this point see Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 415, 416. It is to be noted that Frémont did say in his *Report* (Derby ed., p. 209) and in his *Memoirs* (p. 388) that "the Utah is the southern limb of the Great Salt Lake; and thus we had seen that remarkable sheet of water both at its northern and southern extremity." The Utah, a fresh-water sheet, is really connected with the Salt Lake.

Setting out northward from the lake on September 12, 1843, Frémont and his party rode forward so steadily that they reached Fort Hall on the Snake River at sunset of the eighteenth. They were tormented by hunger; on their first night, they supped upon some sea-gulls which Carson shot near the lake, and on their third Frémont gave the men permission to kill a fat young horse which he had purchased from the Snake Indians. The horse-meat soon restored the forlorn group "to gayety and good humor," but neither Frémont nor Preuss could eat of it. They had too much of civilized prejudice, wrote Frémont: "feeling as much saddened as if a crime had been committed." Later still, they bought an antelope from an Indian for a little powder and lead.

At Fort Hall, where they joined forces again with Fitzpatrick and his party, a thorough refitting and reorganization of the expedition took place. The officer in charge of this southeastern outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company, a Briton named Richard Grant, sold them several poor horses and five fat oxen. This meat was much needed, though Fitzpatrick had rigidly husbanded his share of the stock of flour and light provisions. Already the weather warned them that winter was approaching. On September 19, 1843, it snowed thickly all day; on the night of the twenty-first, standing water froze fairly hard. The lieutenant therefore called his men together, and amid a cold drizzle told them that he thought it best to cut off from his expedition all who were not ready to face the rigors of steady midwinter exploration with scanty food and other supplies. He described the hardships they would probably suffer. Eleven men, including the trusty Basil Lajeunesse (who was needed at home), decided to return east, and set out at once. Frémont and the others on the same day, September 23rd, resumed their

But Frémont made it clear that he thought the connection between the two very slender, and he never said, as Brigham Young stated, that "the south end of the lake was fresh and the north salt." On this point see his letter to the *New York Times*, June, 1877, reprinted in the *Memoirs*, pp. 415, 416. As for the fertility of the region that Brigham Young called a desert, Dellenbaugh (p. 154) pithily remarks that the best answer to Young is the character of the Salt Lake Valley to-day, a rich garden in the midst of the mountains.

journey down the Snake Valley toward the Pacific, the wind driving the chill drizzle in their faces in sharp gusts. He had made up his mind that at or near Fort Hall there ought to be a strong American military post, keeping guard over a farming settlement in this part of the valley, and protecting the Oregon emigrants from Indians. It was deplorable, he wrote later, that these emigrants, exhausted by the long journey of 1,320 miles from Missouri, should have no assistance save the aid furnished by a none-too-friendly British fur post.

At the end of the first week in October, the expedition reached Fort Boisé, another Hudson's Bay Company post, at the point where the Boisé River flows through high basalt precipices into the Snake. A fortnight later, the weather steadily growing colder, they found themselves approaching the district where the Snake, the Columbia proper, the Yakima, and the Walla Walla all merge to form that magnificent stream, the lower Columbia. Frémont was impressed by the scenery. Far to the west, one hundred and eighty miles away, they saw the snowy cone of Mount Hood standing high above the surrounding country, majestic in its isolation. Here was the mission establishment of Dr. Marcus Whitman, consisting at this time of a single adobe house. Frémont felt that he was again approaching civilization:¹⁷

I found Dr. Whitman absent on a visit to the Dalles of the Columbia; but had the pleasure of seeing a fine-looking family of emigrants, men, women, and children, in robust health, all indemnifying themselves for previous scanty fare in a hearty consumption of potatoes, which are produced here of a remarkable good quality. We were disappointed in our expectation of obtaining cornmeal or flour at this station, the mill belonging to the mission having been lately burned down; but an abundant supply of excellent potatoes banished regrets, and furnished a grateful substitute for bread. A small town of Nez Percé Indians gave an inhabited and even a populous appearance to the station; and, after remaining about an hour, we continued our route and encamped on the river about four miles below, passing on the way an emigrant encampment.

¹⁷ Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), p. 249.

From Whitman's mission to the Dalles—that is, the trough where the Columbia is squeezed into a narrow basalt gash, only fifty yards across at the narrowest point—was a difficult journey along the shores of the Columbia, taking till November 5th. Here the bulk of the expedition was left to make repairs and prepare for the homeward journey, while Frémont, Preuss, and two others went on by canoe to Fort Vancouver, far down the Columbia River. The trip was necessary to connect Frémont's operations with those of Captain Wilkes, and was quickly and easily made. On November 18, 1843, the explorer was back in the general camp at the Dalles, bringing with him a three months' supply of flour, peas, and tallow. At the Dalles, the expedition had also obtained some cattle to be driven along and slaughtered, and enough horses and mules to bring the number of pack animals up to one hundred four. Then, abandoning the carts and preparing a large number of pack-saddles for the supplies, the party set out on its return to the United States.

Had Frémont been an explorer who chose the safe and easy path, had he been intent upon getting back to St. Louis quickly with his observations upon the Oregon Trail and the Columbia River country, he would simply have retraced his steps. But to back-track in this way would have been a waste of time, and his intention was very different. He had planned, in his talks with Benton and Linn, to return by a sweeping southward journey which would reveal some of the secrets of the Great Basin, the desert valley which includes so much of Utah, Nevada, and New Mexico. This huge region, more than seven hundred miles square, offered a challenge which he could not resist. Already crossed from east to west by Jedediah Smith, Joseph Walker, and others, it had never been fully traversed from north to south. Frémont meant to attempt just this. His main geographical objectives were to find and describe a supposed Klamath Lake, a "Mary's Lake" which lay oasis-like in the midst of the desert, and—if it existed—the Buenaventura River, which various men (including Benton) believed might

flow from the Great Basin to the Pacific. He meant also to give the Great Basin, or as Gallatin's map, borrowing from Jedediah Smith, had called it, the Great Sandy Desert, a more scientific inspection than it had yet received. In all this he was encouraged by Dr. John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company at headquarters at Fort Vancouver, who even drew for him a rough sketch-map of the interior showing this mythical Buena-ventura.¹⁸

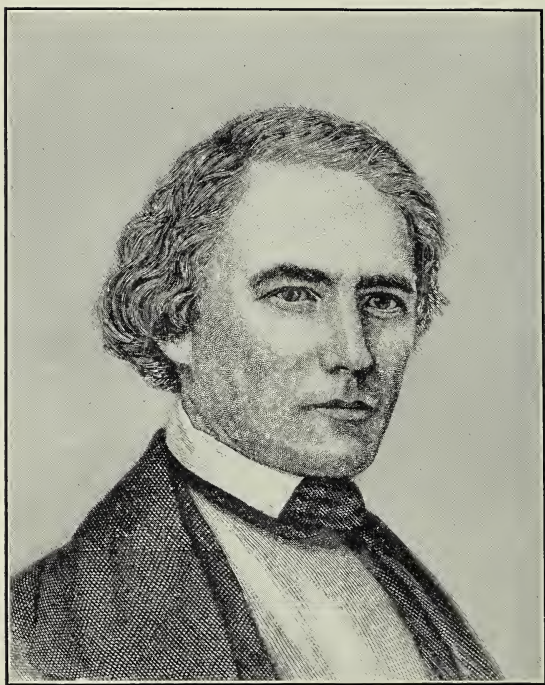
No one knew better than the lieutenant that this was a serious and dangerous undertaking. Winter was just commencing; he had only twenty-five men; the country before him was wild and strange, and he did not possess even the imperfect maps of the latest travelers. Weird and almost incredible tales were told of the disappearing rivers, wind-parched deserts, high mountains, and treacherous savages of the region. As Frémont later recalled, no man of his party blenched, or failed to exhibit entire courage and cheerfulness; "nor did any extremity of peril and privation, to which we were afterwards exposed, even belie, or derogate from, the fine spirit of this brave and generous commencement." But as yet they little understood how grave these perils would be.

¹⁸ McLoughlin was director-in-chief of all the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company west of the Rockies. A kindly man, he was very helpful to American settlers, and eventually became an American citizen. Fort Vancouver stood just opposite the present city of Portland.



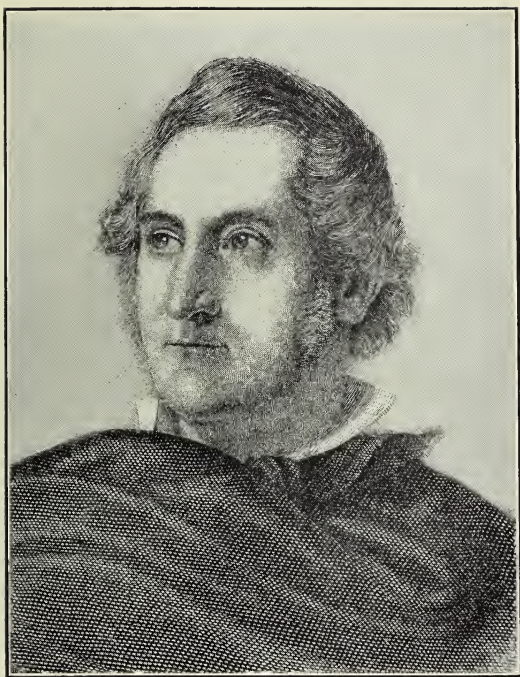
JESSIE BENTON FRÉMONT

(From the portrait by T. Buchanan Read)



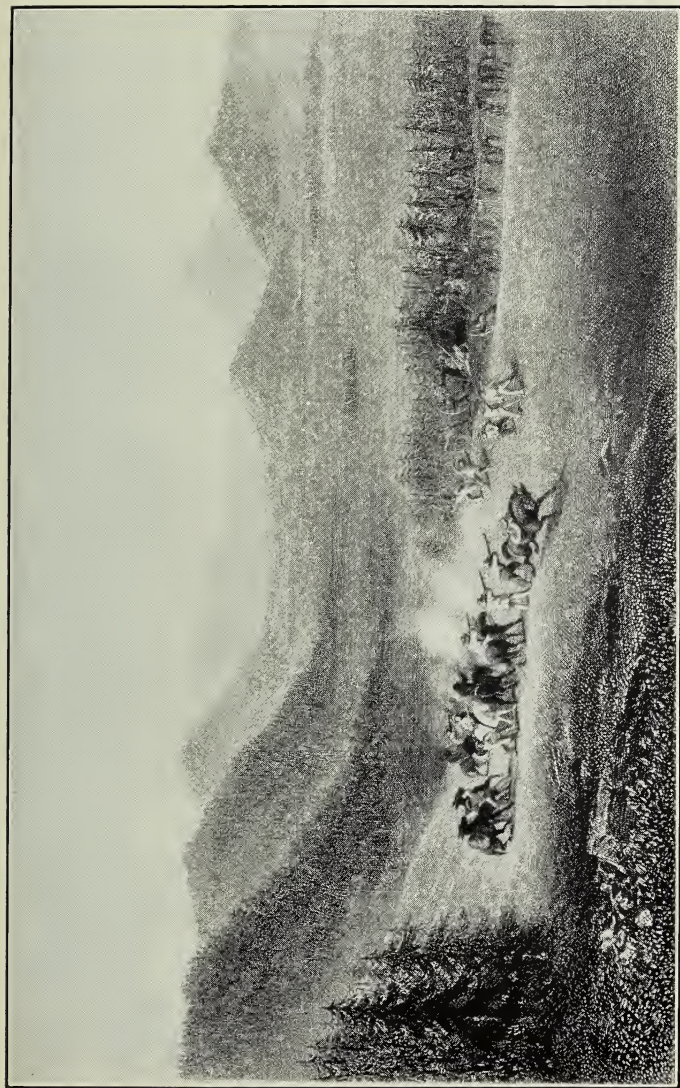
KIT CARSON

(From Frémont's *Memoirs*)

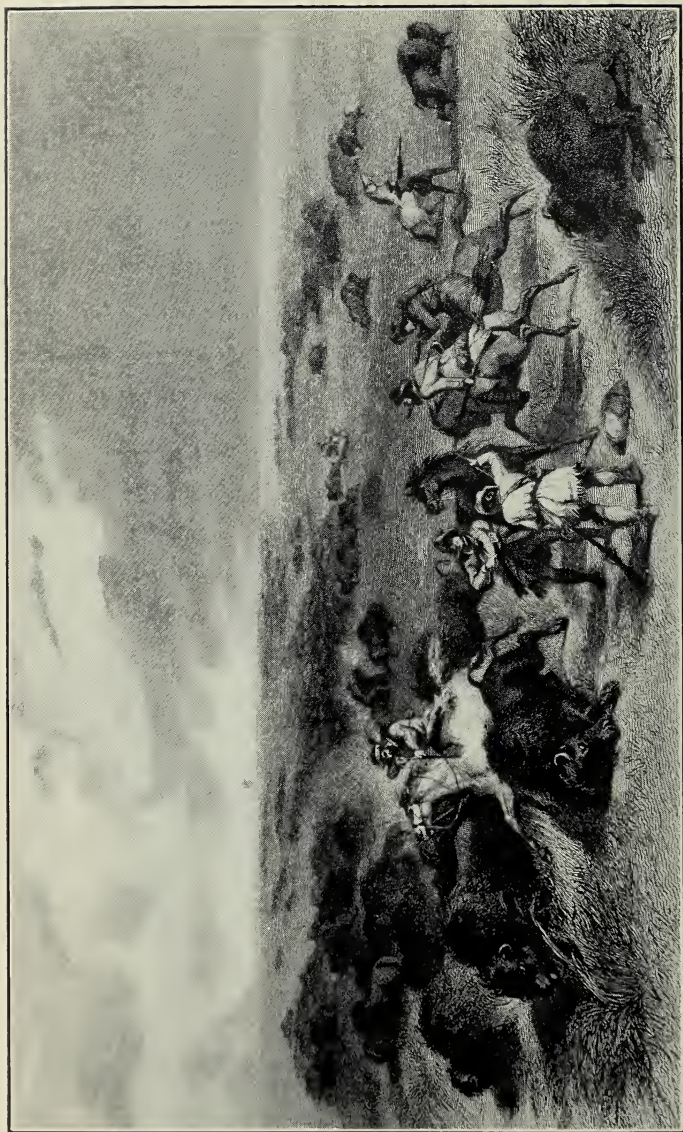


THOMAS H. BENTON

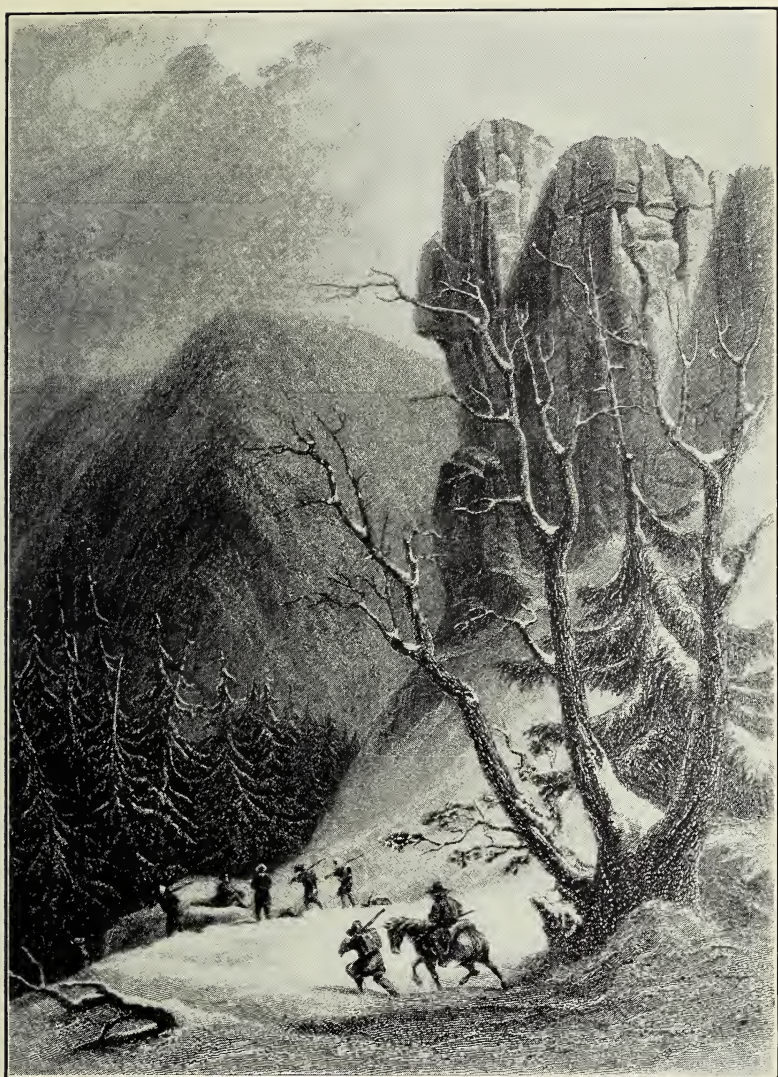
(From Frémont's *Memoirs*)



FRÉMONT'S PARTY ATTACKED BY KLAMATH INDIANS
(From Frémont's *Memoirs*)

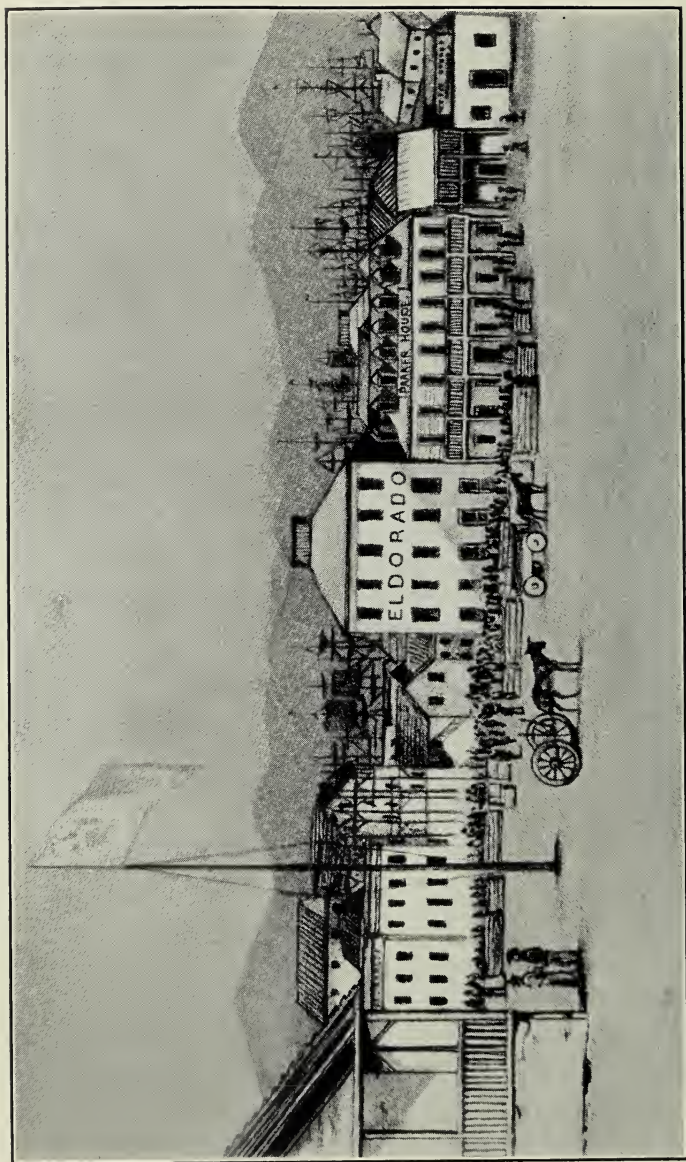


AMONG THE BUFFALO
(From Frémont's *Memoirs*)



SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS, 1848

(From Frémont's *Memoirs*)



PORTSMOUTH SQUARE, SHOWING PARKER HOUSE

XI

Over the Winter Sierras

AS Frémont must have guessed, the most significant portion of his second expedition lay just before him when he turned south from the Columbia. What he had done thus far was simply to complete a scientific survey of a much-traveled trail. He was now to make a journey through a region largely unknown, and to execute a peaceful invasion of a foreign country. On November 25, 1843, the party set out on its long journey; twenty-five men in all, besides some Indian guides hired to go part way, and more than a hundred horses and mules. Frémont generously left his instrument wagon as a gift to the mission. They pushed steadily south along the eastern slopes of the Cascade Mountains, the commander making his usual assiduous notes on topography, botany, zoölogy, geology, and soil-fertility. The scenery was magnificent. But the nights were frigid, the marches laborious; and they soon entered country where the Indians were reputed highly dangerous.

Klamath Marsh in lower Oregon was reached in zero weather, and the lieutenant, in order to explore its banks and give his animals pasturage, lingered there two days. Whether he saw Klamath Lake, which lies thirty miles to the southward, is uncertain. Over the greater part of what he calls the "extensive meadow or lake of grass," at the time of his December visit, the water, or rather the ice, was scattered in shallow pools. The marsh was little more than a wide irregular depression, twenty miles in diameter, which for a short time after the spring melting of the winter snows filled up with water; this subsequently drained away through the Klamath River, leaving

most of the bed in summer a waving green savannah. The explorer fell in with the fish-eating Indians of the marsh region, who had adapted their life with remarkable skill to the locality. Living in large round huts, perhaps twenty feet in diameter, they had learned to make expert use of the grass and rushes. Their grass shoes were well suited to the snowy country; the women had woven large close-textured caps of basket shape; and they also made handsome varicolored mats, some of which the expedition bought for table-cloths and mattresses. On his last morning here Frémont's camp was thronged with these Klamaths, armed with heavy bows and arrows; and knowing their treacherous habits, he kept a vigilant guard.¹

The marsh was left behind them on December 13th, and they pushed farther east, with the sun shining brightly but the cold intense, and the snow from four to twelve inches deep. The mules pulling the howitzer floundered heavily along the uncertain way, and the men found walking laborious. Farther southeast they went, always farther southeast, toward what is now the southern boundary of Oregon. On December 14th, amid a thick snowstorm, they crossed what Frémont mistakenly believed to be the headwaters of the Sacramento, the stream actually being the Klamath River.² He was misled by Indian information, and by the John McLoughlin map, which Benton later called "disastrously erroneous." Next day they killed the cow they had brought from the Columbia, which could find no grass above the snow and was getting thinner and thinner. When they broke camp on December 16th, they found the snow three feet deep, and so crusted that the pack animals

¹ "I was not unmindful of the disasters which Smith, and other travelers, had met with in this country, and therefore was equally vigilant in guarding against treachery and violence"; Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), pp. 286, 287. Jedediah Smith had lost fifteen men in 1828 at the hands of the Umpqua tribe. This sentence of Frémont's is evidence that he knew of Smith's journey through northern California, and should therefore have known of his traverse of the Great Basin in 1827.

² According to Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, pp. 191, 192, the Sycan River, a branch of the Klamath.

constantly cut their legs in breaking through it. Their path lay through a dense pine forest, the green branches bowed with snow, and the air dark with the falling flakes. The depths of the somber woodland were profoundly still, and Frémont felt a wonderful impressiveness and beauty in the quiet, broken only by some sudden breath of wind whirling the snow through the upper branches. One direction looked like another; they seemed to be going through some detached and enchanted wilderness, and it required an exertion of the will to preserve a constant course. Thus struggling forward, they came out at noon on the verge of a vertical rocky cliff. They were traversing an upland ridge which overlooked one of the valleys of the Great Basin, and south and southeast their eyes fell upon an entrancing scene: ³

At our feet—more than a thousand feet below—we looked into a green prairie country, in which a beautiful lake, some twenty miles in length, was spread along the foot of the mountains, its shores bordered with green grass. Just then the sun broke out among the clouds, and illuminated the country below, while around us the storm raged fiercely. Not a particle of ice was to be seen on the lake, or snow on its borders, and all was like summer or spring. The glow of the sun in the valley below brightened up our hearts with sudden pleasure; and we made the woods ring with joyful shouts to those behind; and gradually, as each came up, he stopped to enjoy the unexpected scene. Shivering in snow three feet deep, and stiffening in a cold north wind, we exclaimed at once that the names of Summer Lake and Winter Ridge should be applied to these two proximate places of such sudden and violent contrast.

Descending to this central valley, the expedition found travel for the next few days much easier, and the weather milder. They celebrated Christmas Day on the banks of Warner Lake in lower Oregon by a discharge of the howitzer and their small arms, and by serving a ration of brandy, sugar, and coffee. The next night they made camp nearly on the present Nevada

³ Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), pp. 289, 290.

boundary line, and the following morning pressed on into northwestern Nevada. Their march carried them at first through a district of lakes and streams, the drainage of the great Sierra Range, dominated by Mount Shasta, which rose to their right; then into a forbidding country of gullies, arid hills, sage-brush flats, and sandy stretches sown with black volcanic rock. Frémont began to grow worried, for his twenty-five men were tired and his equipment was failing, while they had met no evidence whatever of Mary's Lake or the Buena-ventura River. He was simply verifying the accuracy of the Bonneville and Gallatin maps, which had omitted any such waterway. The party had lost fifteen pack-animals, dead, abandoned, or stolen by skulking savages since they left the Dalles; water and grass were scarce; and early in the new year (1844) they killed the last of the beeves they had brought from the Columbia for meat.

They were genuinely hungry when, January 10th, they reached a large lake, thirty-five miles long, full of salmon trout on which they feasted. By this time they were in a region populous with Indians, and as they advanced saw signal smokes in every direction. Frémont named the water, after an extraordinary rock rising from its midst, Pyramid Lake, and the fresh stream flowing into it, to-day known as the Truckee, the Salmon Trout River. Still moving south, the expedition camped some twenty-five miles from the site of Reno, and on January 18th reached the Carson River. By this date the men were again tired and hungry, and the pack animals all footsore; moreover, the country ahead seemed to be barren, rocky, and difficult.

Under these circumstances, Frémont felt justified in announcing to the men a determination which he was only too glad to reach; a resolution which had perhaps been half-formed when he left the Missouri, and had then taken more definite shape with every mile. This was the crossing of the Sierras into California. It is barely possible that the expansionist senators, and Benton and Linn in particular, had reached an understanding with Frémont that he was to enter California and spy

out the land. They knew that it was like a great ripe fruit, ready to fall into the first hand that touched it; they knew that some Britons were casting envious eyes upon it. They felt that if there was to be war with Mexico over Texas, the United States should possess authentic information upon the feasible mountain passes for an invasion of California; upon the resources of its fertile valleys; upon the attitude of the Californians toward the United States; and upon the strength and position of the Mexican forces under Governor Alvarado. Who could collect this information so well as Frémont, whose journey would carry him to the very gates of California anyway?

Very possibly, Frémont had cherished a faint hope that the mythical Buenaventura might be found, and would lead him down to San Francisco Bay, which the expansionists were so eager to prevent from falling into British possession. When this hope disappeared, he made up his mind to cross the great Sierra Range anyway, just as an American army might have to cross it if war broke out. The exhausted state of his expedition and the difficulty of pressing on by the southwestern route to the Arkansas without recuperation and refitting were a sufficient excuse for this bold move. Actually, there was no necessity for entering California. He could have spent the remainder of the winter comfortably in the Truckee Valley, his men living on antelope, small game, salmon, and pine nuts, his mules growing fat on the good pasturage, and the best homeward route established by a reconnaissance. The only risks were that the loss of animals, which the Indians would continue stealing day by day, might leave his party helpless and stranded; and that the discipline of the men would deteriorate. But to remain would in any event have been a waste of good opportunities. A Mexican decree had prohibited Americans from entering California anywhere, under any pretext, but that did not daunt Frémont, any more than it did numerous American settlers. E. L. Sabin justly comments: ⁴

⁴ *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 361.

Life would possibly have flowed more smoothly for Frémont had he been more of a routine officer, and he would have been spared resentment and humiliation. But, he would have been less of a man. For political ends he was styled the Pathfinder. The paths that he actually found were of scant public utility and were bettered by other paths. He was however a Pathseeker, and there can be no quibbles as to the inspirational values, to the common mind, of his gallant initiative. For Frémont testified to the fact that things could be done.

As a physical venture, the attempt to cross the high Sierras in midwinter was appallingly foolhardy. This mighty range, in places 14,000 feet high, rises precipitously from the east, steep on steep, to a point where, in January, all is a silent, frozen waste of snow and rock, as bleak, empty, and bitter as the Himalayas themselves, with no life or movement save the terrific storms which sweep across the peaks and valleys. The pine forests which lead up to these heights are choked with snow. Paths and trails are hidden beneath the drifts, and the sub-zero temperature means death for those who lose themselves in the mountain corridors. If an unusual series of blizzards had overtaken Frémont's party, it could not have avoided the fate of the Donner emigrants, overwhelmed and unable to move either forward or back.⁵ There are few passes in the high Sierras, and in the year 1844 they were virtually unknown. No maps were available, no scientist had ever examined the range, and no white man had ever crossed it in winter.

Yet Frémont embarked upon this perilous undertaking in a characteristically headlong way. Though he might profitably have spent a week or two on the Truckee gaining strength and by brief expeditions searching for the best pass, he plunged immediately and blindly into the maze of foothills which led

⁵ The Donner party of about eighty men, women, and children, caught by the mountain snows near what is now Truckee, California, in the winter of 1846-47, suffered a terrible disaster. Thirty-nine died. When Sutter sent two Indians with mule-loads of beef to them, they ate both the beef and the Indians. A child of the party, Eliza P. Donner Houghton, wrote in old age *Expedition of the Donner Party and its Tragic Fate* (1911).

to the formidable icy rampart beyond. As F. S. Dellenbaugh says, a delay of a fortnight would have cost nothing and would have benefited him materially; but delay was never congenial to Frémont. Setting out January 19, 1844, on the second day he camped in the Pine Nut Mountains near the present site of Virginia City. He little thought that within a few miles was a stupendously rich vein of gold and silver, the Comstock Lode, which twenty years later was to bring into existence one of the roaring cities of the West. On January 24th, he met an old Indian of the Washoe tribe, who volunteered to lead the expedition to a good pass, and not only accompanied them for two days, but introduced some friendly tribesmen who sold them pine nuts. The road grew constantly rougher as they approached the main chain of the Sierras, and on January 29th they were compelled to a step which Frémont deeply regretted; they abandoned their little howitzer, which had been dragged so many miles and had never proved more than a useless encumbrance. A young Washoe was hired as guide and on January 30th he led them into the head of Antelope Valley, but becoming cold and discouraged, shortly left.

The Indians whom they met at this point all advised Frémont against continuing farther. They could communicate with him only by signs, but in their earnestness they spoke rapidly and vehemently, emphasizing the folly of his intentions. The word *tahve*, signifying snow, occurred often in their discourse. They plainly thought the Sierras impassable. Already, in the foothills, the thermometer was below zero at night, and the snow three or four feet deep in places. Frémont, however, assured the savages that his horses were strong and would force a passage through the drifts. On January 31st, they perceived clearly what was before them. That afternoon, with the snow falling heavily and the weather so frigid that one man had a foot frozen, they descended a pass which gave them a long view westward. They saw embanked before them a great continuous range, its foot defined by the Carson River Valley, its lower parts steep and darkly clothed with pines, its mag-

nificent crests hidden in gloomy snowclouds. This forbidding rampart was the central chain of the Sierras.

Just what Frémont's men thought of the enterprise we do not know. The young commander served an occasional ration of brandy to heighten their spirits; he exhorted them like Napoleon before the Pyramids. He reminded them of the beautiful valley of the Sacramento, so often described by Kit Carson, who had delighted the expedition by speaking of its rich pastures and abundant game. He drew a contrast between its summer climate, less than a hundred miles distant, and the bitter cold they now suffered. He informed them that his instruments, in which long experience had given them complete confidence, showed that seventy miles directly west was Captain Sutter's great ranch; and that from the heights just before them they would be able with one effort to place themselves in the midst of plenty. Frémont had at times a ready French eloquence, but it is not certain that his sanguine confidence carried the men with him. He tells us that some of them remained "unusually silent."⁶

They started upward on the morning of February 2, 1844, a clear and frosty dawn, in a deeply serious mood. From this point, an old chief told them, it took six or seven days to cross the mountains in fair summer weather. Their Indian guide—for they had procured another—shook his head ominously as he pointed to the icy pinnacles of the Sierras thrusting high into the sky. They knew that the issue of their adventure was doubtful. They now had sixty-seven animals with them, but their provisions were falling low. They possessed no tallow or grease, no salt, and had been so long without meat that one mess received permission to eat a fat dog which they had with them. The snow deepened immediately, and it was necessary to begin systematic path-breaking. This was done by forming a party of ten, mounted on the strongest horses; each man took turns in breaking a way, and as he became tired, the next one took his place. So well did this plan work that

⁶ Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), p. 324ff.

on the first day they traveled sixteen miles, and mounted to an altitude of 6,760 feet, camping in four feet of snow, but near a meadow of bunch grass partly cleared by the wind.

Thus they pushed on. On February 3rd they made less progress, only seven miles; on February 4th they were brought almost to a stop. In the afternoon they attempted to force a road toward a pass which the guide indicated ahead, but their horses, after laboriously plunging two or three hundred yards, became exhausted and refused to make any further effort. The guide regarded their position as hopeless, telling them they were just beginning to enter the deep snow. Most of the animals had been pushed thus far only by leaving their packs behind, so that the trail was strewn with stores and equipage. The party had no choice but to camp where they were, on the heavily wooded mountainside, without shelter, in a freezing wind. They built fires, covered the snow with large boughs, and soon had a degree of comfort. But many of the men were ready to give up. There ensued a striking scene, of which Frémont has left us a vivid picture: ⁷

Two Indians joined our party here; and one of them, an old man, immediately began to harangue us, saying that ourselves and animals would perish in the snow, and that if we would go back, he would show us another and a better way across the mountain. He spoke in a very loud voice and there was a singular repetition of phrases and arrangements of words which rendered his speech striking and not unmusical.

We had now begun to understand some words, and with the aid of signs, easily comprehended the old man's simple ideas. "Rock upon rock—rock upon rock—snow upon snow—snow upon snow," said he; "even if you get over the snow you will not be able to get down from the mountains." He made us the sign of precipices, and showed us how the feet of the horses would slip, and throw them off from the narrow trails which led along their sides.

Our Chinook [guide], who comprehended even more readily than ourselves, and believed our situation hopeless, covered his head with

⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 332.

his blanket and began to weep and lament. "I wanted to see the whites," he said; "I came away from my own people to see the whites, and I wouldn't care to die among them; but here"...and he looked around into the cold night and gloomy forest, and, drawing his blanket over his head, began again to lament.

Seated around the tree, the fire illuminating the rocks and the tall bolls of the pines round about, and the old Indian haranguing, we presented a group of very serious faces.

A man with less force of will, less buoyancy of temperament, would have turned back, but Frémont was not daunted. At dawn next morning their faint-hearted Indian guide deserted. Frémont, who found the night too cold to sleep, had seen him standing by the fire with all his finery on, and, observing him shiver, had kindly thrown his blanket over his shoulders; a few minutes afterward the treacherous fellow decamped. The lieutenant's mind had been busy overnight, and he had resolved to set the majority of his party to making sledges and bringing up the scattered baggage while he and a few others undertook a reconnaissance on foot of the heights ahead.

This reconnaissance, in the face of terrifying obstacles, was effected on February 6th. The snow lay in an average depth of five feet, and not infrequently, as they judged by the treetops emerging from it, was twenty feet deep. On steep slopes it was covered with an icy crust of great slipperiness, down which the horses would sometimes slide, helpless till some tree or rock arrested them. At this elevation of 7,500 feet the cold was intense the moment the sun passed behind a peak or cloud, and the party had to keep moving briskly even at midday. They made a weaving, circuitous path, for the depth of snow in the hollows compelled them to follow the hillsides and cross the jutting spurs where wind and sun had in part cleared away the drifts. The men, wearing snow-shoes, marched in a single file, trampling down the snow heavily, so that after freezing hard at night it would bear the weight of the horses the following day.

The ground first ascended sharply to the top of a fairly high

ridge; beyond this lay a broad timbered basin, some ten miles across; and at its extremity rose the high crest of the Sierras, a gloomy wall of volcanic rock. The summit presented a line of naked peaks, the harsh rock glowing in the morning sun, bare of either snow or vegetation; but leading up to the timberline, the slopes were covered with pines and other trees of extraordinary size.

After much effort, the party reached the crest of the range, slightly to the left of a pass which had been pointed out by their guide. A welcome sight met their eyes. The mountain slopes, in part densely wooded, descended steeply below them. Far in the distance at their base, lying half defined in a warm haze, stretched a great, smiling valley, its greens and browns untouched by any sign of snow. Straining their eyes, they could descry far to the west, not less than a hundred miles away, another and smaller line of mountains—the low Coast Range. Frémont gazed in delight, while the men shouted for joy. It was the fertile Sacramento basin. "There," exclaimed Kit Carson, pointing toward the coast, "is the little mountain—it is fifteen years ago since I saw it; but I am just as sure as if I had seen it yesterday."⁸ They could pick out spots of prairie in the valley, and with the telescope could vaguely follow the dark line of the Sacramento. Then they turned hurriedly back toward camp, for the sun was sinking.

It proved a difficult struggle to bring up the animals and to carry the whole outfit over the summits. Snow-glare rendered many of the party almost blind, and only by tying black handkerchiefs over their eyes could they keep on. The trail that had been beaten on the sixth was filled with driving snow on February 9th and 10th, when Frémont and a few others advanced only about five and a half miles, leaving the animals at the base camp. For a time, it seemed almost impossible to get the horses and mules over the pass at all. Fitzpatrick, who had been left behind to make the attempt, reported that his efforts were futile. When he led them out on the half-hidden trail,

⁸ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 333; the little mountain was Monte Diablo.

the packed snow beneath would not support them, and they broke through; some plunged about in the drifts, and some lay buried in the white mass. The poor beasts, which Carson tells us had been driven by hunger to eat one another's tails and the leather of the pack-saddles, possessed little strength. But Frémont refused to be defeated. He had the entire force turn to with mauls and shovels, set them to scooping and packing down a road, and made them strengthen it with pine boughs. It was exhausting work, and the food on which they did it was none too substantial. On the thirteenth the cook killed their little pet dog Klamath, and that night they supped on mule meat, dog meat, and pea soup.

Final victory was won on February 20, 1844. On that day, the expedition camped with all its animals and equipment on the summit of the pass, one thousand miles by their tortuous road from the Dalles of the Columbia. (This pass, to-day called Carson Pass and marked for tourists by a granite boulder and inscription, lies west of the present-day town of Woodfords, California.) They had conquered the Sierras in mid-winter. By boiling water on the pass, they computed its elevation at 9,338 feet. Only the descent lay before them, and this seemed easy. The weather became delightfully clear, and as they went downward they had the benefit of wide views of the country below, with light and shadow playing across it. On the afternoon of the twenty-third, they heard the roll of thunder, and looking down saw the broad breast of the valley wrapped in the darkness of a storm, the jagged lightning playing in and out of the clouds. They watched the thunderstorm till sunset, when the clearing skies revealed another magnificent scene: a long shining line of water which led westward toward another gleaming expanse, a broader and larger sheet. They knew that this could be nothing but the Sacramento River and San Francisco Bay. That night, as they made their camp-fires, they saw blazes lit in the valley below, as if in answer. They were actually the fires of Indians in the *tulares* of the bay, eighty miles distant.

On March 6th, after many further trials, the ragged, hungry expedition, a woeful procession of weak and emaciated men each with a horse or mule as emaciated as himself, was approaching such civilization as that part of California afforded. They had found the Sacramento Valley, as they advanced, an enchantingly beautiful country, which seemed unequaled anywhere in the West for stock growing. Its reaches were gay with flowers, and in places were a mass of gold with the California poppy. Much of the valley was beautifully wooded with evergreen and white oak, and as there was no underbrush, it all had the appearance of a carefully tended park. Here and there were traces of horses and cattle, and once they had passed a small village of Indians. In mid-afternoon, cantering forward, Frémont and a little body of men in advance⁹ gave a sudden shout. They had come in sight of a little bluff, topped by a neatly built house with glass windows! It was occupied only by a few Indians, but they rode forward more eagerly than ever. A large stream, sometimes one hundred yards wide, flowed on their right, and swept around a broad bend; the hills grew lower, until they entirely ceased; and entering a wide valley, the men rode unexpectedly into a populous Indian village. The inhabitants wore clean cotton shirts and other civilized apparel. Frémont's men were overjoyed when a well-dressed Indian came up, and saluting them in courteous Spanish, told them they were upon the Rio de los Americanos, which flowed into the Sacramento ten miles below them. The weary party was near its goal.

Carson continued questioning the Indian and joyously translated his replies to Frémont. The native told them that he was a vaquero, or cowboy; that all the other Indians about were employees of the same ranch; and that it belonged to Captain Sutter, upon whose riches and power he expatiated. The men had heard the name; in fact, it was known all the way from

⁹ Frémont, Kit Carson, and a squad of others had pushed ahead of Thomas Fitzpatrick, who brought on the cripples and the baggage; Frémont's *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), p. 352. Frémont makes it clear that he depended upon Fitzpatrick for many responsible duties.

the Pacific to the Mississippi. Frémont asked to be directed to his house, and was told that it lay just over the hill, whither the Indian would conduct them. They rode forward, splashed through the river, and after a few miles came within sight of a large, low, powerful-looking structure of whitish adobe, with several buildings rising over its enormously thick walls. This post, its chief angles bastioned by little blockhouses, was the fort built by Sutter as a defense against savages, marauding bands, and the guerrillas whom the frequent outbreaks of civil war in California set loose upon the country. It was an edifice of manifest strength. They were upon the site of the future city of Sacramento.

XII

Sutter's Fort and California

IT was a tattered, exhausted, woebegone caravan which wound its way up to the gates of Sutter's Fort. Of the sixty-three horses and mules which had begun the ascent of the Sierras, only thirty-three survived. Frémont and a few others who led the way had good mounts, but the rest made a pathetic procession, crawling along single file, skeleton men leading skeleton horses. They needed all of Sutter's generosity.

Johann August Sutter, as his short, stout figure, the blond hair fringing his bald head, his large blue eyes, and his air of cherubic kindness all testified, was of German blood. He had been born in Kandern, Baden, forty-one years earlier, had spent much of his early life in Switzerland, according to some accounts had attended the military academy at Neuchatel, and had certainly married, begotten children, and served in various mercantile employments. He always spoke of himself as a Swiss. A dreamer, enterprising and adventurous, he had slipped all his home responsibilities and arrived in New York, almost penniless, in the summer of 1834. His imaginative French biographer tells us that, leaving a trail of creditors behind him, he signalized his landing in New York by a wild gesture. "He leaped upon the quay, dodged past the police guard placed there, threw a single rapid glance along the whole water front, uncorked and emptied at a draught a bottle of Rhine wine, threw the empty bottle into a West Indian lugger, and with an exultant burst of laughter launched himself into the passing crowd."¹ For some weeks he picked up a living in the East by

¹ Blaise Cendrars, *L'Or*, p. 31. This wildly inaccurate book deserves some credit for helping recreate interest in Sutter. A somewhat too favorable but otherwise useful life of Sutter has been published since by Julian Dana; while

turning his hand to anything he could find, from bookkeeping to taxidermy, and then set out restlessly for the West. He brought up at St. Louis, and presently settled for a time at St. Charles, Missouri. In 1835 he accompanied a trading party to Santa Fé, and repeated the trip in 1836. He seemed a born rover.

In the spring of 1838, Sutter joined the Eels-Walker missionary party, and followed the Oregon Trail to the Dalles. Arriving at Fort Vancouver in October, he was told that the snow in the mountains and the hostile Indians made it impossible for him to continue on to California, and was urged to accept employment with the Hudson's Bay Company. But his imagination had been set on fire by what he had been told of California—its incomparable wealth, its scanty population, and the feeble Mexican grasp upon its allegiance. He took a vessel to Honolulu, and thence to Sitka, where he waited until he found a ship which brought him into San Francisco Bay on July 1, 1839. During this Hawaiian stay, he was struck by an ingenious and profitable idea: since labor was scarce in California, and he would need many hands for the ranch he planned, why not employ a company of the sturdy Kanakas whom he saw all about him? Some associates in Honolulu gave him material encouragement in the project, and it was arranged that the first Kanakas should arrive at New Helvetia—for this was the name Sutter bestowed upon his future domain—within a year and a half.²

Once landed in California, Sutter hastened to present himself before Governor Alvarado at Monterey. With the Governor's permission, he declared, he would take up a ranch in the country, bring in Kanakas to till the ground, and establish a post, well-armed, that would serve as a protecting barrier to settlements between it and the coast. Alvarado was favorably impressed by the energetic, enthusiastic young man, and by his

more thorough studies of some phases of Sutter's career have been printed in the *California Historical Society Quarterly* by James Peter Zollinger.

² See *Sutter's Own Story*, edited by Erwin G. Gudde (1936).

apparently well-matured plans. The Swiss pointed out that his undertaking might be made of far-reaching benefit to the civilized Indians, thousands of whom had been thrown back into savagery and misery by the confiscation in 1834 of the religious establishments by the Mexican Government; that as his ranch developed, he could bring many of these Indians together, and assign them land to be worked under his direction. He wished to plant the ranch in the Sacramento Valley. If all went well, he would strike a telling blow for the rehabilitation of upper California, so depressed since the birth of an independent Mexico.

The result was that Alvarado authorized him to select a tract, promising him that within a year a grant would be made; and the indomitable Swiss, chartering at San Francisco Bay a schooner and yacht and buying a pinnace, voyaged inland to the mouth of the American River. Here, about August 16, 1839, he discharged his possessions, and with fifteen men mounted guns, posted sentries, and began placing his colony on a solid footing. Before winter closed in, he drove to his ranch about 500 head of cattle and 75 horses, purchased at low cost from native Californians. Apparently he had in his employ a motley crew—sailors, Kanakas, Mexican cowboys, and friendly Indians. The energy with which they labored soon transformed the place. Wells were dug; water was brought from the river in wooden pipes; fields were laid out, bridges thrown across streams, roads constructed, and trails marked. On a spot of rising ground overlooking the Sacramento and the American, they set to work upon a ranch house and other structures: stables, granaries, storehouses, kitchens, and workshops. These and the surrounding walls were built of the most substantial materials and planned to last a lifetime. A village for the Kanakas was constructed in a neighboring ravine, and constant supervision kept them as busy as the rest. The colony soon took sturdy root. In June, 1841, Sutter paid another visit to Alvarado, and having already become a Mexican citizen, he received a grant of eleven square leagues of land, or a little less than

49,000 acres. He at once began the work of fortifying his New Helvetia. His stronghold, with high walls, loopholed bastions, and frowning cannon, was completed before the end of 1843.

For a time the Indians proved a grim menace; once Sutter's life was saved by a mastiff which sprang upon a would-be assassin who had entered his bedroom, and repeatedly, he later told American visitors, he was so hemmed in by hostile savages that he had to subsist upon the seeds of wild grass. They watched his encroachments upon their ancient hunting-ground indignantly, and were ready at the first opportunity to fall upon him, murder his employees, and burn his grain and buildings.³ Moreover, the region was overrun by bands of brigands, some of them formidable. But the ranch grew steadily in strength and importance. For military aid Governor Micheltorena in 1845 made him a new grant of twenty-two square leagues of land; and more and more land was brought under cultivation. Additional Kanakas arrived from the Pacific Islands. Sutter sent recruiting agents among the friendly Indian villages, and within a short time some two hundred and fifty natives, partly civilized by mission contacts, were busy on his estate. In 1841 he was joined by several American immigrants who had come overland, and whom he was glad to use as overseers. Other Americans straggled in, and even those who did not take up land under his grant, or hire themselves out to him, grew accustomed to use his fort as a rendezvous. The Sacramento Valley, in fact, by the winter of Frémont's sudden arrival, was the seat of an extensive American settlement, upon which the Mexican authorities looked with increasing suspicion.

Frémont, observing all that he could in California, was impressed by Sutter's establishment. He found that this grand seigneur was making arrangements for extensive irrigation along the American River. The waving green of his wheat fields, all sowed by the thin, ragged, sun-darkened Indians, represented about six hundred bushels of seed. His herds were increasing, his fields expanding, and he was surrounded by a

³ Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, p. 265ff.

peaceable, industrious population. The Indians labored stolidly at all the operations of the huge ranch—ditch digging, plowing, harrowing, seeding, brick making, and building and Frémont saw those about the fort feeding like animals upon the poorer meat of slaughtered oxen, and the bran sifted from Sutter's horse-mill. This bran was boiled into a mush in large wooden kettles and then placed in wooden troughs, in the courtyard, from which the messes scooped out what they wanted in their hands. The fort contained a blacksmith shop, distillery, cannery, flour-mill, and room for other industries. For their work, the Indians were paid in goods from Sutter's large store, and tin coins, each stamped with a certain number representing the days labored, were issued by Sutter for circulation. The rancher needed only to apply to a friendly chief to receive an ample supply of Indian boys and girls for training. At the moment he had a large company of girls at the fort, whom he hoped to employ as operatives in a woolen factory.

It was plain to Frémont that Sutter thoroughly enjoyed his position as margrave of the upper Sacramento, the ruler of a domain equal to several cantons of Switzerland. He allowed the story to become current that he was a former courtier of Charles X of France.⁴ He had an appetite for popularity, applause, and even gross flattery, which his dependents gave him in generous quantity. But Frémont saw that he was shrewd enough to preserve a position of comparative independence in a country torn by conflicting forces and a fierce factional strife. Some of the American settlers were plotting to detach the province from its loose allegiance to Mexico, and throw it into the hands of the United States; and the Californians were well aware that an uprising might occur at any moment. Between the two sides, Sutter maintained a position of safe neutrality. He assumed an appearance of fidelity to the Mexican Government, yet gave Americans of the region to understand that if the test came at the right time they might count on his sup-

⁴ Josiah Royce, *California from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco*, p. 41.

port; and by courier service he kept himself and them in communication with St. Louis. The result was that the Mexican authorities paid him every outward mark of respect and gave him the title of Guardian of the Northern Frontier, with the rank of captain, while at the same time the Americans regarded him as a potential ally.

The skilled workmen of the little settlement were invaluable to Frémont's exhausted expedition. The forge of the blacksmith's shop roared day and night while the horses and mules were shod; bridles and pack-saddles were brought from the store-rooms; one shift followed another at the horse-mill, grinding flour for the party; all was bustle and movement. Fresh horses and cattle were delivered and paid for. Sutter, insisting that Frémont and his men get as much repose as they could, seemed the soul of hospitality. "In manners, dress, and general deportment," later wrote one American, "he approaches so near what we call the 'old school gentleman' as to present a gulfy contrast with the rude society by which he is surrounded." The dining-room at the fort was plainly furnished with an ordinary pine table and benches, and its dishes were very ordinary china. But Sutter's Indian girls were able to serve what seemed to Frémont a sumptuous feast. They brought in salmon and trout fresh from the river; roast ham, venison, bear meat, smoked tongue, and fresh steaks; green peas, salads, and many fruits; and good Rhine wine—a refreshing change from the piñon nuts and dog-stew upon which Frémont and his fellow explorers had been faring.

Most important of all for the future of Frémont and California was his intercourse with the American settlers of the Sacramento Valley. By 1840 the foreign population settled in California, chiefly American and British, exceeded four hundred souls. Sutter had in his employ some thirty white men, of whom part were Europeans, but a majority Americans. A few miles distant on the American River lay the ranch of an American named Sinclair, while just across the Sacramento was that of the new-comer Joseph B. Chiles. The explorer was told that

the previous summer a party of Easterners had entered the valley from Oregon, while in the fall a second company had arrived after an arduous journey by way of Fort Boisé and the Pit River Valley.⁵ He learned that trappers tired of the mountainside and sailors tired of the sea were constantly settling in California. Sutter, as a California official, was accustomed to issue permits to new-comers allowing them to remain in the country, though as aliens they were disqualified from holding land. It was evident that American immigration was swelling to a considerable stream. Only two years later, the consul of the United States in Monterey was able to report that there were almost twelve hundred foreigners in California, and to describe the mounting flow from the East: ⁶

The first arrival of American settlers on the Sacramento has been since 1840; three-fourths of the full number of foreigners in this country are Americans, of the remaining fourth, the subjects of Great Britain predominate. Of this fourth, the majority are in expectation of being under the government of the United States; probably all are willing, in preference to remaining as they now are; for the last five years, the larger proportion of the emigrants have arrived at New Helvetia (Captain Sutter's establishment) excepting a few of them from Oregon; they leave Independence, Mo., which is the starting point, every April or May, arriving on the Pacific in September or October. Soon after their arrival at New Helvetia they [are] scattered over the River Sacramento and the Bay of San Francisco, asking for farms from the government, or settling on private grants by the owners' consent; some have arrived at the Pueblo de los Angeles (Town of the Angels), near San Pedro, via Santa Fé, some of whom had married at the latter place; a few arrived from Valparaiso, Callao, and the Sandwich Islands; a person traveling from San Diego to San Francisco, or Bodega,

⁵ The Oregon party had come under the leadership of an Ohio lawyer, Lansford Hastings; the other company was the Chiles-Walker party, which gave Sutter some valued employees.

⁶ Thomas Larkin, *Reports*, State Department Archives; evidently written 1846, but dated May 1, 1847. The Larkin Papers, including letterbooks, are in the Bancroft Library, and have been made the basis of R. L. Underhill's thorough biography of Larkin.

can stop at a foreigners' farmhouse almost every few hours, and travel without any knowledge of the Spanish language.

...The emigration in 1845 amounted to from four to five hundred; from the United States newspaper reports to 1845, from one to two thousand are expected to arrive this August to October 6 [1845].

The economic rewards of settlement in California, as a glance at Sutter's rich possession showed, were tempting. Wheat made an average yield of 25 bushels to the acre, and, transported easily down the Sacramento River to San Francisco Bay in launches of 50 tons' burden, sold there for \$2.50 a *fanega*, or about \$1.20 a bushel. Land was incredibly cheap, and \$200 would buy a square league (4,438 acres) of excellent quality and situation; labor cost little but food and clothing, and no expensive buildings or fences were needed. Frémont also heard that there were numerous American trading ships constantly on the coast. He learned that in 1842 Monterey had been suddenly seized by a Yankee commodore, Thomas Jones, who had heard an unfounded rumor that the United States and Mexico were at war, raced from South America with what he supposed to be English warships, took the fort, and ran up the American flag. Next day he had learned that there was no war and that he had not even raced English ships! The Mexican Government had taken umbrage at this aggression, but native Californians were little disturbed by it.⁷ Not a few would have welcomed American sovereignty, as relieving them from atrocious customs burdens and increasing the value of their lands.

Before Frémont left the Sacramento Valley, he had gained a clear impression of the anomalous state of affairs in this wealthy Mexican province. The white population amounted to not more than eleven thousand people, "descendants," as Consul Larkin said, "of Spanish and Mexican fathers, mostly from native mothers." These Californians were proud to think them-

⁷ According to *Life in California*, by an American (Alfred Robinson), many wealthy Californians apparently shared the pleasure of American settlers in Jones's act.

selves a distinct and superior element in the loose Mexican federation. Devoted almost wholly to ranching, they lived in rude but comfortable adobe houses, surrounded by the ordinary farm buildings and corrals. The family was usually large; its head an affable and hospitable man, its sons handsome, high-spirited young blades, finely skilled in horsemanship, and its daughters comely, buxom, virtuous girls. Vaqueros or cowboys and Indian servants of both sexes abounded, making the life of the land-holder rather indolent. The cattle were branded or ear-marked, and the annual *matanzas*, or round-ups, occurred in August. Though agriculture was so little practised that now and then the people almost starved, in general they lived well on beef, mutton, tortillas, vegetables, and the magnificent fruits of the region. They had, however, few luxuries, for the extortionate duties made them unattainable. Roads were bad, or rather non-existent; the houses crude; and conveniences few and simple. Carts, for example, used the cross-section of a tree for wheels. The trade of the country was largely in the hands of a few Boston houses, which sent out cargoes of textiles, shoes, hats, hardware, and "notions," and, keeping their ships two years at a time in California ports, brought back hides and tallow at an enormous profit.⁸

The Spanish or part-Spanish population held closely to the coast all the way from San Diego to the bay of San Francisco; a narrow, much broken ribbon of settlement. The fertile interior valleys were left to the wild Indians, to trappers, and in the north to the American ranchers who were becoming so numerous. Four coastal towns were "fortified"—San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and Yerba Buena; but the fortifications were ruinous and worthless. Indeed, since the seizure of the missions old California had been sinking into decay; but the cheap, fruitful, and pleasant land was happy in its decline.

Lazy, gay, uneducated, the people of California might have led an idyllic life, had it not been that for more than a decade

⁸ Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, Chs. 21, 22; Walter Colton, *Three Years in California*, p. 27ff.; Alfred Robinson, *Life in California*, *passim*.

now they had been tormented by opera bouffe wars and petty convulsions, in part springing from, and in part merely accompanied by, a growth of republican sentiment. The Californians, who surpassed the Mexicans in stature, activity, and mental grasp, or at least believed that they did, resented any interference by officers "*de la otra banda.*" They had repeatedly shown themselves capable of driving Mexican governors out of the province; in 1836, they had thus revolted against and deposed Governor Nicolas Gutierrez; and under his revolutionary successor, Juan Alvarado, had insisted that California was a free and sovereign state. But for the quarrels between rival families, and the marked jealousy between the northern and southern sections of California, this freedom might have been made absolute. It is a noteworthy fact that American residents had been prominent in the incidents of this little revolution of 1836, the foreigners in the country siding with and even leading the native Californians in their opposition to Mexico. But Alvarado, whose strength lay in the northern region about Monterey, San José, and San Francisco Bay, had difficulty at first in obtaining the support of the southern district about Los Angeles and San Diego. The Mexicans, striving to maintain some vestige of their authority, were always able to play upon this ill-feeling between the northern and southern parties. Yet even so, by 1840 their grasp upon the province or department was weak and precarious.⁹

When Frémont met the settlers and native Californians of the upper Sacramento, under Sutter's hospitable roof-tree or in excursions through the country, the tide of resentment against the Mexican connection was fast rising toward a new revolt. Some recalled with indignation that Alvarado had arrested a large body of Americans, notably a group captained by Isaac Graham, a trapper, and had exiled forty to a Mexican prison, where they spent months under charges of plotting a revolt before being allowed to return. In 1841 the central authorities had made a final effort to place a

⁹ Theodore H. Hittell, *History of California*, II, p. 234ff.

Mexican governor in power, the before-mentioned Manuel Micheltorena. He was personally disliked, and the Mexican soldiers whom he brought with him, some of them former convicts, were bitterly hated. Talk of independence was becoming steadily more earnest. Every one felt that the hour was near when California would be launched into freedom like a ship from the stocks. Would it set up as an independent nation, as Texas had done? Would it fall into the hands of the British, who had many traders along the coast, whose Hudson's Bay Company was well established in northern California, and who were believed ready to exchange their Mexican bonds for the possession of the province? Or would it come under the control of the Americans?

There can be little doubt that Frémont discussed these questions with Sutter, Chiles, Sinclair, and others; above all, with Sutter. The "Governor of the Fortress of New Helvetia," as he liked to be called, had long considered the possibility of himself heading a movement for independence. He had drawn up, to be sent to Washington, a plan for the conquest of the province, under which he was to be given command of the troops and half of the territory conquered.¹⁰ Knowing that the Mexican authorities regarded him with suspicion and hostility, he had taken pains to strengthen his fort by mounting twelve good Russian cannon on his walls, which were six feet thick, and had acquired muskets, rifles, and ammunition for eighty men. When Frémont arrived, there was a garrison of forty uniformed Indians, one always on duty at the gate. Commodore Wilkes had reported that Sutter was "using all his energies to render himself impregnable," and that only his success in doing so prevented the Mexicans from trying to eject him; Lar-kin had reported that they would like to buy him out. All Americans who took up land in the Sacramento Valley looked upon his fort as a rallying point in the event of trouble.

Nor was Sutter averse to making occasional threats against

¹⁰ John Bidwell, *Out West Magazine*, XX, p. 183ff.; Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), p. 354.

the Mexican officials. Resentful when Governor Alvarado authorized the Hudson's Bay Company to send trappers along the Sacramento, he wrote an angry letter in which he spoke of his military strength:

The people don't know me yet, but soon they will find out what I am able to do. It is too late now to drive me out of the country; the first step they do against me is that I will make a Declaration of Independence and proclaim California for a Republique independent from Mexico.

He had breathed defiance in this letter against José Castro, a resident of Monterey and partisan of Alvarado's who became military commander of the province. If they leave me alone, he wrote, I will be quiet; "but when this Rasclé of Castro should come here, a very warm and hearty welcome is prepared for him."¹¹ Castro had been prominent in the arrest of the Isaac Graham party. The feelings of many Americans were precisely the same as Sutter's. Most of them had a horror just now of Micheltorena's vicious and ill-controlled soldiery and were eager to see them—fortunately poorly armed and few in numbers—expelled from the country.¹²

Doubtless it was a somewhat one-sided view of California life and conditions which Frémont obtained. The American settlers probably spoke somewhat contemptuously of their California-born neighbors. Had Frémont come into contact with such leaders as Alvarado and his relative, General Vallejo, who lived just north of San Francisco Bay, he would have found them men of cultivation, intellectual power, and high character. Had he stayed longer and penetrated toward the coast, he would have admired the peaceful and attractive existence which the

¹¹ Irving Berdine Richman, *California Under Spain and Mexico*, p. 271.

¹² Royce, *California*, p. 29; compare Charles E. Chapman's *History of California: The Spanish Period*, pp. 478, 479. Alfred Robinson wrote of Micheltorena's *cholos* that they presented a state of unequaled wretchedness and misery, not one of them possessing a jacket or pantaloons. "They appeared like convicts, and indeed the greater part of them had been charged with the crime either of murder or theft. And these were the *soldiers* sent to subdue this happy country."

rancheros led. They were jovial and friendly; their family life was remarkably pure, and the women were possessed of great innate refinement; into all their works, acts, and speech there entered an element of beauty and artistry. They loved their horses and were perfect Arabs in managing them. They worked in moderation; rode from ranch to ranch a great deal; dressed in gay colors; held pleasant dances and serenaded the belles with old Spanish songs; raced a little, drank more, and gambled a great deal. In fact, with some gaming at monte was a passion, and, when excited, the young men would not only stake all they possessed upon a deal of cards, but would give a note upon some *tio* or uncle, some *primo* or cousin, the payment of which family honor made obligatory.¹³ Their chief faults were their indolence, pride, quarrelsomeness, and an occasional tendency toward cruelty. Their life as a whole was genial, interesting, and charming, but not such a life as appealed to strenuous American frontiersmen.

It would have been better for all California two years later had Frémont obtained a more sympathetic impression of the Californians, but his time was limited. Two days after he reached Fort Sutter, on March 8, 1844, he pitched his camp at the junction of the American and the Sacramento. On March 22nd, when he had finished re-equipping his party, he ordered camp broken; and as the first stage of his journey southward, moved to a point near Sinclair's ranch. On the twenty-fourth, he resumed his progress in earnest. Five of his expedition, including the blacksmith Samuel Neal, had been left behind by their own wish. But he drove off with him a huge cavalcade of animals, numbering one hundred and thirty horses and mules and about thirty head of cattle, including five milch cows. Sutter, who accepted in payment drafts upon the Topographical Bureau which he had to cash at 20 per cent discount, furnished an Indian lad to help manage the half-wild beasts.¹⁴ He also presented Frémont with a saddle-horse named Sacramento,

¹³ J. W. Revere, *A Tour of Duty in California*, Ch. 13.

¹⁴ Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 369.

an iron-gray of the best California stock. The kindly, exuberant Swiss accompanied them for some miles, and as they disappeared in a cloud of dust down the valley waved them a cordial farewell. He little thought that when Frémont returned it would be to make him prisoner in his own fort.

XIII

Homeward Over the Rockies

FRÉMONT had so planned his homeward journey that he might see the greatest possible amount of new country.

He intended to travel five hundred miles south, skirting the western base of the Sierras, to a pass which had been discovered far below the San Joaquin, near the upper course of the South Fork of the Kern River, by Joseph Walker, the famous Santa Fé trapper who had served under Bonneville and had broken the trail from Great Salt Lake west across the Great Basin to Monterey.¹ Having crossed the Sierras by this pass, Frémont meant to strike southeast toward Santa Fé. This town could be reached by the ancient "Spanish Trail" running across from Los Angeles; but his design was to halt before actually arriving at the capital of New Mexico, and turn off into Colorado, where he could make for the headwaters of the Arkansas.

Simple as the route seemed, it involved two thousand miles of heavy travel, much of it through a rough and semi-desert country. There was not a settlement anywhere, and the names of the points and rivers on the way—Indian and Spanish names—showed that few Americans had ever traversed it. But this was precisely the reason why it appealed to Frémont's imagination. It would enable him to trace the Sierra Nevada southward, identify the streams flowing from it to the coast, explore the boundaries of the Great Basin between the Sierras and Rockies, ascertain whether any great rivers other than the Colorado flowed southwest from the Rockies—thus making absolutely certain there was no Buenaventura—and examine

¹ W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, p. 256.

the southern end of the Great Salt Lake. This program was all carried out.

It was not executed without hardship and some adventures of peculiar interest. The first of these occurred in the closing days of April, 1844, soon after they had reached the Spanish Trail, which was still a virgin road with sufficient grass, though the thousands of horses and mules belonging to the annual Los Angeles caravans would soon be on their tracks. High noon of April 24, 1844, saw them following the arid bed of the Mohave River, with water to be found only in scattered pools. The country about, save for occasional damp spots overgrown with cottonwood, willow, and acacia, was desert and forbidding. Some Mohave Indians whom they met carried large gourds of water, an eloquent fact. The explorers knew that on the route before them they would have to make many a *jornada* of forty to sixty miles without finding water between their stopping places, and that the trail would be dotted with the bones of wild animals.² In preparation for the test before them, they had killed three of their cattle and dried the beef.

On the afternoon of the twenty-fourth they were surprised to see two Mexicans, a grizzled man and a handsome boy of eleven, burst into camp. Wild, disheveled, and exhausted, they gasped out a terrible story. Their party of six, traveling from Los Angeles, had been overwhelmed by a hundred hostile Indians, who descended upon them with the yells of fiends and a storm of arrows. These two, out guarding the horses, alone escaped, and driving what animals they could through the very line of the Indians, rode at top speed for sixty miles. Leaving their exhausted horses at Tomaso Spring, they had continued on foot, hoping to find succor. They were overjoyed when Frémont promised every possible assistance. Early the next day he and his party swung abruptly away from the Mohave River and soon reached Tomaso Spring. They found, as they expected, that the horses were gone; driven away, a swift examination of the ground showed, by the Indians. Frémont felt

² Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 368.

that he had no right to divert his entire expedition to follow the savages, but he did not object when Kit Carson and the almost equally experienced scout Alexis Godey volunteered to ride on with the older Mexican in pursuit.

The horse which the Mexican, Fuentes, was riding, soon failed—or perhaps his courage did so—and he turned back; but Carson and Godey pressed on alone. Toward nightfall, the trail entered the gloomy mountains and became rougher, but they followed it by moonshine till late at night, when, in a dark and narrow gorge, it became too indistinct to trace. Afraid of losing it, they tied their horses to trees and lay down to sleep in the still, inky darkness, not striking a light. At the first glimmer they were astir and took the trail again. They had not gone far, and the sun was just beginning to rise, when they discovered horses ahead of them. Halting at once, and leading their own mounts back to a hidden point, they crept up cautiously to a little eminence commanding the Indian encampment. Here they saw four large skin lodges pitched among the trees, fires blazing, pots boiling, and the savages gathered about breakfast. At this moment, a young horse became frightened at the two creeping men, snorted, and betrayed them to the Indians.

Carson and Godey, never hesitating, gave a war-whoop and charged into the camp, firing point-blank from their rifles. Two Indians fell mortally wounded, and the others, fearing that the boldness of two men who thus attacked thirty meant a trap, took to their heels. An arrow passed through Godey's shirt collar, grazing his neck. With a final volley, the scouts turned to the savages writhing on the ground. Thinking them dead or dying, they stripped off their scalps, when one of the men, though he had received two balls through the body, sprang to his feet with a howl of agony. With the blood streaming from his gory head, he was a horrifying sight. An old squaw, possibly his mother, looked back from the mountain side up which she was hurriedly clambering, and pausing hysterically to fling a handful of gravel at the white men, loosed a volley of threats

and lamentations. Momentarily appalled by the frightful spectacle, Carson and Godey despatched the Indian. Then they turned on their trail and soon aroused Frémont's camp, Carson shouting and Godey waving the two scalps tied to his gun.

It is evident that when Frémont heard of the scalping he felt pained and regretful, but his compunction was dissipated by subsequent events. Carson's biographer surmises that Kit and Godey were actuated less by a desire to avenge the wretched Mexicans than by a shrewd impulse to throw a proper fear into these murderous desert Indians, and thus clear the trail ahead.³ One outrage, if not decisively punished, would soon lead to others.

The expedition continued northeastward, across the dismal, waterless plain that constitutes the semi-desert region of California and Nevada; a land hot, rocky, and brown, with no vegetation except prickly cacti, sage-brush, and yucca trees. The desolate region was walled in with forbidding mountain ranges. To escape the pitiless glare of the sun, Frémont adopted the plan of starting late each evening and traveling all night. It was an unhappy-looking procession that wound through the dusty darkness. Scouts were sent ahead and on the flanks, the armed men were divided into front and rear divisions, and the baggage animals and cattle were driven in the middle, making a cavalcade a quarter mile in length. On April 28th they were tormented by a heavy gale, which flung the sharp sand in their faces so violently that it was almost impossible to continue, but they camped that night in a green valley, with good grass and clear water. Next day they soon covered the seven miles of desert which lay between them and the Archillette, or campground of the Spanish Trail where the Mexican party had been ambushed. Frémont describes what met their eyes as they rode to the grassy spot, with its springs and willows: ⁴

The dead silence of the place was ominous; and, galloping rapidly up, we found only the corpses of two men: everything else was

³ E. L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 380.

⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 375, 376.

gone. They were naked, mutilated, and pierced with arrows. Hernandez had evidently fought, and with desperation. He lay in advance of the willow half-faced tent which sheltered his family, as if he had come out to meet danger, and to repulse it from that asylum. One of his hands and both his legs had been cut off. Giacomo, who was a large and strong-looking man, was lying in one of the willow shelters, pierced with arrows. Of the women no trace could be found, and it was evident they had been carried off captive. A little lap dog, which had belonged to Pablo's mother, remained with the dead bodies, and was frantic with joy at seeing Pablo; he, poor child, was frantic with grief, and filled the air with his incessant lamentations for his father and mother. *Mi padre!*—*mi madre!*—was his incessant cry. When we beheld this pitiable sight, and pictured to ourselves the fate of the two women carried off by savages so brutal and so loathsome, all compunction for the scalped-alive Indian ceased; and we rejoiced that Carson and Godey had been able to give so useful a lesson to these American Arabs, who lie in wait to murder and plunder the innocent traveler.

They soon learned that they were on the border of an exceedingly hostile Indian country. On May 3, 1844, after following the general line of the present Los Angeles-Salt Lake City Railroad, they reached Las Vegas in Nevada, a marshy basin where two springs, warm but pure, gushed up with great force. The horses and mules were becoming exhausted from want of water and grass, while the continuous flinty rocks were cutting their hoofs to pieces.⁵ One by one, they dropped and had to be abandoned; the men clipping off their tails and manes to make saddle girths. On May 4, 1844, the expedition made its hardest day's journey since leaving the Sierras. They had started early, for the skeletons of horses along the trail soon proved that they had a long, parched *jornada* before them—between fifty and sixty miles without a drop of water. Their thirst became almost unsupportable. The sun glared down and the hot yellow sand reflected it like a burning glass; waves of sultry heat shimmered across the desert. Occasionally they halted to chop into a cactus of the variety called *bisnaga*, the

⁵ Frémont, *Report, Second Expedition* (Derby ed.), p. 386.

pulp of which has a slightly acid juice, or moistened their mouths by chewing some leaves of sour dock. Hour after hour they toiled on, expecting to find water just ahead, and always disappointed. The sun dropped low, the stars came out, and still they plodded forward, fatigue and thirst making every step a burden. Finally, near midnight, when they had been on the march sixteen hours, the mules suddenly kicked up their heels and began running impetuously ahead. They had scented water. Another mile or two, and the party reached a rushing stream, the Rio de los Angeles, or Muddy River.

Here, after they had made camp and settled down for a day's rest, they were surrounded by Indians who threatened an attack. At dawn the savages, jabbering a Ute dialect, began emerging from the wild country about and crowding toward the camp. Frémont told the guards to warn them off, kept his men under arms, and had the horses driven back to camp. Repeatedly the Indians made insulting demonstrations, which he felt it best to ignore. His position was badly exposed, for though it had the river and some willow thickets on one side, on the other it was commanded by a rocky bluff. The savages were a treacherous-looking crew. They were naked save for breech-clouts; their fashion of gathering their hair into a tight knot at the crown of their heads lent an unnatural and fiendish aspect to their faces; the restless, furtive glare of their eyes, their ill-controlled movements, their evident tendency to act upon impulse instead of reason, made them resemble fierce beasts of prey. Each carried a powerful bow and a quiver of thirty or forty arrows, tipped with a clear, translucent stone, a kind of obsidian, which was nearly as hard as a diamond; and Frémont knew well that at close range these were as effective as a rifle. They would pierce a man's body almost through, and leave him lifeless in an instant.

Once hostilities seemed likely to begin. In spite of Frémont's strict orders, an old chief forced his way full-armed into camp. His mien was threatening and provocative. "Why, there are none of you," he said tauntingly. Counting the men about the

camp, he tallied twenty-two on his fingers insultingly. "Only that many," he said, "and we—we are innumerable!" With this, he waved to the hills and mountains about. When the white men pointed to their rifles, he thrust his fingers into his ears and pretended he could not hear. "If you have your arms," he said a moment later, twanging his heavy bow, "we have ours, too." This was as much as the hot-tempered Carson could endure. "Don't say that, old man," he exploded; "don't say that—your life's in danger." Probably, as Frémont commented, the old chief was nearer his end than he would be till he actually met it.

They left without mishap, and two days later camped at a point nearly fifty miles distant, on the Rio Virgen, which Frémont describes as the dreariest river he had ever seen: a deep, rapid, turbid stream, running swiftly through a desert country. By this time they had killed their last steers. The wretched Moapa Indians of the country hung constantly about the expedition, but refused to come into camp. They seemed little better than wild beasts. Living upon the lizards and other small animals of the rocks, using long hooked sticks to draw them out of their holes, they were cowards, thieves, and in all the most degraded human beings Frémont had ever seen. As the expedition pushed up the Rio Virgen, an increasing pack, like so many wolves, stealthily followed the white men; and whenever Frémont had occasion to double momentarily upon his trail, he found the sandy soil of the river bottom thickly covered with their footprints. It was impossible to let a tired horse or mule drop behind for even an hour. The half-starved Indians would pounce upon it and leave nothing but hair and bones. Under these circumstances, they made camp for a day's rest on May 9, 1844, at a spot on the river where there was a considerable patch of grass; and here the expedition met its first fatality.

Frémont, worn out with his responsibilities, the heat, and some recent extra labor in arranging botanical specimens, lay down for an afternoon nap. Before he sought his tent one of

his men, Tabeau, had gone back on the trail to seek a lame mule. When he awoke, the worried Carson reported that Tabeau should have been back long before. A moment later they perceived a smoke rise suddenly from a cottonwood grove below. It was an unmistakable token that he was dead, for such signal fires were kindled to tell the Indians roundabout that a blow had been struck. Carson and several others were instantly sent down the river on good horses, and soon returned with sad news. They had come upon the mule lying in a thicket, mortally wounded, while not far distant they had found a little puddle of blood. The next morning all their apprehensions were confirmed: ⁶

...As soon as there was light enough to follow tracks, I set out myself with Mr. Fitzpatrick and several men in search of Tabeau. We went to the spot where the appearance of puddled blood had been seen; and this, we saw at once, had been the place where he fell and died. Blood upon the leaves and beaten-down bushes showed that he had got his wound about twenty paces from where he fell, and that he had struggled for his life. He had probably been shot through the lungs with an arrow. From the place where he lay and bled, it could be seen that he had been dragged to the bank of the river and thrown into it. No vestige of what had belonged to him could be found except a fragment of his horse equipment. Horse, gun, clothes—all became the prey of these Arabs of the New World.

The men under Frémont were now a family of brothers, and they sent up a general cry of grief and anger. They would willingly have stopped to avenge Tabeau's death, but the exhaustion of their horses forbade any plunge into the unexplored mountains about. The tribe which had committed the murder was the same which had been hanging upon the skirts of the expedition. But after this day they disappeared like ghosts, melting into the wilds; they knew they deserved punishment, and instead of the numbers visible before, not one appeared for more than a fleeting glimpse.

Yet this loss marked almost the end of their hardships. They

⁶ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 381.

were then camping just west of a mountain gap through which the Spanish Trail wound. As they approached it by a rocky defile, they saw that the nature of the country was swiftly changing. It had been arid, bare of all but the roughest vegetation, and inhospitable; now it became forested with cedar, nut-pine, and cottonwood, with heavy underbrush; and they perceived many birds in the trees. They were entering a country which furnished grass, game, and water; they were emerging from the arid regions. On May 11, 1844, the transformation was signalized by a brisk shower, while in the evening, with heavy clouds covering the sky, a cold wind sprang up and made overcoats desirable. They were now well within the future state of Utah, following the Santa Clara River. On May 12th, they arrived at the great camping ground, Las Vegas de Santa Clara (the Spaniards used *vegas* to signify fertile, well-watered meadows, as distinguished from *llanos* or dry and barren flats), where the annual caravan from Los Angeles always halted and recruited for some weeks before pushing on to Santa Fé.

This point, regarded as the terminus of the desert journey from the West, was later named Mountain Meadows, and was the spot rendered infamous by the murder thirteen years later of nearly all of a party of western emigrants by some Mormon fanatics and Indians. Subsequent travelers have found it a dismal place under the shadow of that crime, but to Frémont's men it was wonderfully fresh and attractive. They were now on a dividing ridge between the waters of the Rio Virgen, flowing south to the Colorado, and those of the Sevier River, flowing north into the Great Basin. Having remained one day for rest, they descended into a broad valley, its streams tributary to Sevier Lake, and the next morning, moving northward, came within sight of the high peaks of the Wasatch Range, which sweeps toward Wyoming and looks down, in its northern portion, upon the expanse of Great Salt Lake.⁷

⁷ Dellenbaugh correctly comments (*Frémont and '49*, p. 270): "He had now seen more of this Great Basin than any other white man with the exception,

The events of the remainder of their journey were in part commonplace. They were shortly joined by the noted hunter Joseph Walker, who had been traveling from Los Angeles with the great California caravan just behind them on the Spanish Trail, and who, seeing their fresh camp-fires, had guessed their identity. Walker possessed a fuller knowledge of this region than any other man living, and Frémont was glad to hire him as guide. They met also the famous Ute chief called Walker, with a powerful band armed with good rifles, journeying slowly toward the Spanish Trail to exact his annual tax from the Los Angeles caravan. A little later they lost one of their men, Badeau, by an accident with a gun. On May 24th, they approached Utah Lake, and Frémont took time for a cursory examination of this sheet of water. It was unfortunate that he did not make a more thorough investigation, for in his report he later stated, as we have seen, that it is connected with Great Salt Lake as "the southern limb"; though a brief reconnaissance would have made it clear that the Jordan River flows northward into Great Salt Lake, and that a wide belt of land, thirty miles or more across, intervenes between Utah Lake and the larger sheet.⁸

From Utah Lake, Frémont might easily have returned by the well-traveled Oregon Trail, but he was too tireless an explorer for that. Instead, he penetrated the Wasatch and the Uinta Mountains, crossed the Continental Divide through what is now termed Muddy Pass, which he called "one of the most beautiful we had ever seen," and turning south through the beautiful park region of Colorado, then moved southeast to Pueblo, Colorado, which he reached June 28, 1844. On July 1st, they were at Bent's Fort, and here Carson and Walker, feeling that their work was done, remained. George Bent treated the party with his usual warm hospitality. On the last

perhaps, of Walker; but Walker had no knowledge by experience with that portion lying north of Pyramid Lake along the flank of the Sierra. Frémont's estimates and deductions concerning the immense interior country were remarkably accurate even to its approximate area."

⁸ Compare Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 271.

day of July they were again at Kaw Landing on the banks of the Missouri River. After fourteen months' absence from civilization, they were exultant to revisit the familiar scene. They lost no time in resting, but the day following their arrival took a steamboat and were gliding down the Missouri. Frémont, with his usual humanity, refused to sell his travel-worn animals, to be scattered over the West for fresh toils and starvation, but placed them in good pasturage on the frontier—to be used in still a third expedition, if he could arrange one.

The fourteen months following Frémont's departure had been a period of anxious waiting for Jessie. She had spent them, summer and winter, in the roomy Benton mansion, in St. Louis, whither the family had soon removed from the Brant house. She could not possibly have heard from him after he reached Fort Hall on the Snake River in late September, 1843; it does not appear that she heard from him at all. Aware of his intention to skirt the Sierras and visit California, she guessed that midwinter might find him in an unexplored and dangerous mountain country. Nevertheless, she hoped that he would be able to return quickly and safely by some warm southern route. As early as January, 1844, she cajoled herself into believing that he might arrive any day, and hopes and fears struggled together in her mind. Each evening a place was set for his supper, and a bed made ready for his arrival; each night a lamp was trimmed and placed near the window, to burn through the darkness. Jessie would lie awake worrying and listening for his quick, firm tread on the flagging. Then in the morning she would look ruefully upon her preparations, and take away the little supper table she had kept ready.⁹

The household watched Jessie's increasing anxiety with concern. During the summer, when Senator Benton had been in Missouri, she had been entirely cheerful. For one thing, Benton insisted that she keep occupied—he had on a previous occasion of the kind set her to work translating Bernal Diaz;

⁹ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, p. 162.

for another, he kept the house lively with society. He loved to sit in the long gallery looking out on the inner courtyard, shaded by large acacias, with their clusters of vanilla-scented blooms; and here he would hold a morning levee attended by politicians, prominent St. Louis citizens, army officers, and old family friends. In the evening, others would call. St. Louis was growing fast, and its population of thirty thousand gives an utterly inadequate impression of its importance as the chief port of the upper Mississippi, the doorway to the West. The old French town was being shouldered to one side by hustling American "additions"; business streets toward the river were taking on a Broadway aspect; the water-front was lined in summer with scores of steamers and alive with roustabouts; the flood of emigrants, traders, trappers, and ranchers pouring westward grew heavier and heavier; Jefferson Barracks had become the chief military post beyond the Alleghenies. All the currents of the city's life were represented in the wide Benton circle.

But Benton had to return to Washington in November, 1843, for the opening of Congress, and thereafter Jessie saw less society. She had two families of relatives, the Brants and Pottses; she knew the Chouteaus, "Colonel" Dent, whose future son-in-law, Ulysses S. Grant, was a second lieutenant fresh from West Point at Jefferson Barracks, and many other of the old residents. Two young men of whom she had seen a good deal in Washington were much at her house: Montgomery Blair, an attorney of thirty who had just become mayor of the city, and his brother, Frank P. Blair, a hot-tempered but able young man who had graduated from Princeton two years earlier, and was now practising law. Her father and their father—Francis P. Blair, the great Jacksonian editor of the *Washington Globe*—had long been intimate. Jessie had also her baby and her invalid mother. But these distractions did not really occupy her. Nor was the news, in March, 1844, that a great explosion had occurred on the warship *Princeton* on the Potomac, and that the bursting of a 225-pounder gun which slew Secretary Up-

shur and Secretary Gilmer had narrowly missed killing her father, who escaped with only an injured eardrum, more than a momentary interruption of her anxiety.

Toward spring, as trappers and traders came down the Missouri for their annual supplies, a rumor reached Jessie's friends that Frémont had gone up into the high Sierras after winter closed in, had suffered from severe storms and starvation, and had pushed on and disappeared. This rumor purported to come from Indian sources. Naturally, her friends kept it from Jessie's ears, but she was aware that something was held in reserve under the increasing expressions of tenderness which her family threw about her.¹⁰

Spring reminded her that time was passing; on May 29th, with a sinking heart, she realized that Frémont had been absent precisely a year. June—July—the first of August all passed, while her apprehension mounted, and she even felt moments of despair.

Frémont, journeying impatiently down the bar-choked, snag-filled river, reached the junction of the Missouri and the Mississippi about sunset on August 6, 1844, and remained awake as the boat chugged toward the town. It was after midnight when the levee, marked in the darkness by scattered lights and the lanterns of moored steamboats and scows, came into sight. Some yawning Negroes emerged under the August stars upon the wharves; ropes were thrown and missed with a splash; there was an uproar of screaming escape valves and the plunge of wheels backing water; the gang-plank went down with a rumble, and Frémont was one of the first men ashore. No carriages were available at two o'clock in the morning, and he walked uptown. He passed through sleeping business streets, entered the French quarter, and was soon under the windows of the Benton mansion. Old Gabriel, the coachman, slept on the second floor of the carriage-house, and by throwing pebbles at the open window Frémont roused him. His first question was

¹⁰ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs*, p. 163.

whether the family were all well. "Yes, dey's all well," came Gabriel's raucous whisper. "Can you let me in without waking anybody?" asked Frémont. "Is dat really you, and not a ghost?" demanded Gabriel. Frémont repeated his question. "Yes, I can let you in," said Gabriel; "but Mrs. Frémont, she's at Miss Anne's, for Mr. Potts is very sick."

Frémont turned and hastened downtown at a brisk walk. Miss Anne was Jessie's cousin; the Rev. Mr. Potts was her husband, living in the parsonage next the Presbyterian Church. The lieutenant's first thought was to awaken the family and see Jessie. But he recalled that Potts suffered from tuberculosis, and that an alarm in the middle of the night might bring on another hemorrhage. Already there was a faint tinge of rose in the east. The best spot to while away the hours till servants in the parsonage began to stir was the lawn in front of Barnum's Hotel, and here he sat down on a bench, watching the stars begin to pale. An employee, seeing his uniform, came out to offer him a room, and at once recognized the worn explorer.¹¹ The hotel clerk was insistent that he come up to a bedroom and rest, and Frémont had little inclination to refuse. He knew that the Bentons were well; all his responsibilities and anxieties had rolled from his shoulders like Christian's load; and stretching himself upon his first bed in eighteen months, in a few minutes he was asleep.

Meanwhile, the coachman Gabriel had risen at dawn and carried his strange news to the Benton family. He was heard with incredulity. A messenger was hastily despatched to the Potts house to make inquiries, and awakened Jessie. The incredulity increased. Nobody had seen Frémont except Gabriel, and Gabriel was not certain that the visitor had not been an apparition. The nurse for the baby promptly accepted the ghost theory, and raised a weird lament. At this moment came a ring at the door, and in walked the tired and emaciated explorer. He had slept long past daybreak at the hotel, and in hurrying to the parsonage had met one St. Louisian after an-

¹¹ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs*, pp. 164, 165.

other who stopped to welcome him. Even now, he and Jessie were not left alone. The parsonage was soon thronged with friends, the Blairs and other prominent citizens came in, and Frémont had to hold an impromptu reception before he could breakfast with his family.

Frémont had in his direct charge several members of the expedition—the Mexican orphan Pablo, rescued on the Los Angeles trail, a Chinook Indian, and two California Indian boys, Juan and Gregorio, of whom he had to make some disposition. Juan and Gregorio were sent to a farm of Benton's near Lexington, Kentucky, and took with them Frémont's saddle-horse Sacramento. The Chinook Indian, whose devouring wish was to see some of the great eastern cities of the white man, accompanied the lieutenant to Washington, and was educated by the Indian Bureau. As for Pablo, his bright, cheerful ways won the heart of everybody in the Benton household; and as he seemed to become attached to the Senator and his family, he was kept with them. The Mexican minister, General Almonte, offered him transportation home to Mexico, but he wished an American education, and for a time showed ambition and aptitude. Unfortunately, as he grew up he drifted away from the Bentons, fell into evil ways, and was finally heard from—or so Frémont avers—as the famous robber Murietta in the San Joaquin Valley.

XIV

Washington Expansionists and the Far West

AFTER a brief rest in St. Louis, Frémont hurried on to Washington with Jessie, for he was eager to make his report and lay plans for a third expedition. He found that his old circle in the capital had been largely destroyed by death. Nicollet and Hassler had died within a few weeks of each other in the autumn of 1843, the former, after a complete mental breakdown, having passed away alone at a Washington hotel. "After all," wrote Frémont feelingly,¹ "it would have been a fitter end for him to have died under the open sky, and been buried rolled up in a blanket, by the side of some stream in the mountains, than to have had life close in the night and alone at a hotel." Senator Benton's enthusiastic colleague, the lively, winning Lewis Linn, who came so naturally by his zeal for western development—his grandfather had been one of the first to navigate the Mississippi from Pittsburgh to New Orleans—had also died in the fall of 1843, a grievous loss to the expansionist group.² Frémont reported upon reaching Washington to General Scott, and made an official call on the Secretary of War, Wilkins, who was astonished by his youth. Then he settled down to a short interlude of home life.

There ensued a happy period of social ease, domesticity, and congenial work. The young couple lived with the Bentons, whose house gave them ample room. The family dined sometimes alone, sometimes with guests of importance. The evening was spent about the fireplace, the Senator reading or writing, Mrs. Benton, whose health had much improved, though her

¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 412.

² Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, p. 485.

speech was impaired, sewing, and Frémont studying his notes. At first, much occupied with mathematical computations, he was vexed by the numerous visitors who came to talk to him about Oregon and California, and by the stream of questioning letters. His work, in fact, for a time almost stopped. To escape interruptions, he rented as workshop a little wooden cottage of two stories, set well back in enclosed grounds not far from the Benton home. Here he and his assistant, a young man proficient in astronomy and mathematics, rapidly reduced the calculations of the expedition to order. Then came his report, a much more interesting employment, upon which, as before, Jessie gave him invaluable assistance.

They made a delightful partnership of the undertaking. Frémont would marshal his data the evening before; he was up at dawn for a breakfast of coffee and rolls; and punctually at nine Jessie would join him in the workshop. There they labored uninterruptedly till one o'clock, he dictating and she writing. As before, the method was congenial to his rapid, enthusiastic mind, and favorable to the style of the report. He would plunge ahead, without the interruption of using a pen; the necessity of making everything clear to Jessie enhanced the lucidity of his exposition; and her questions upon details, her instinct for the significant, her sense of literary form, were indispensable. She liked the work. "Talking incidents over," testifies Frémont, "made her familiar with the minuter details of the journey, outside of those we had recorded, and gave her a realizing sense of the uncertainties and precarious chances that attend such travel, and which day and night lie in wait; and it gave her for every day an object unusual in the life of a woman."

At one o'clock the baby was brought in; Jessie rose from her cramped position; the colored mammy gave them their luncheon of cold chicken, beaten biscuit, and fruit; and off they went for a walk to the Potomac. On some nights, Frémont had observations to verify. One or two o'clock in the morning would find him with his assistant Hubbard and a Negro servant, stretched on his back on the flagstone of a neighboring church,

watching for the emersion of a particular star. Sometimes he and Hubbard, both young, were noisy. A deacon who lived opposite the church thought it his duty to come to Benton and to tell him that Frémont and two boon companions often returned late from a revel so drunk that Frémont lay down on the church steps and could hardly be roused. Jessie tells us what followed:³

Just then we came in from our after-lunch walk, all fresh and animated. Calling us into the library, my father said in his most dangerously polite way, "There are Mr. and Mrs. Frémont, and I wish you to repeat to them what you have been telling me."

The deacon hemmed and hawed, but my father's stern command, "Repeat it, sir," could not be evaded.

The explosions of laughter which followed from us might have enlightened him—but when the simple fact was told him, he had to stand a lecture from my father on his looking for the worst motive, and his want of Christian charity.

Frémont's second report, which was shown to Benton and in part to Benton's friends as it progressed, was nearly three times as long as the first (more than 300 duodecimo pages) and even more interesting. With as much scientific exactness as before, with the same clear data upon topography, climate, soils, vegetation, and wild animals, it again contained that wealth of general information upon western life for which Americans were eager. Turning to a few pages upon the work of the expedition after it reached the upper Platte at the beginning of July, 1843, for example, we find matter that would interest everybody. He offers a description of Long's Peak, as first glimpsed, "a faint blue mass," on the horizon; notes on the number of the Oglallah Sioux, who had lost all their beasts the previous winter; comments on the growing scarcity of game in the Platte Valley; an account of the trading-post, Fort Lancaster, and the Arapahoe villages near by; a narrative of an encounter with a bear which charged the party; a long discussion of the fertility of the soil between the Platte and Arkansas; a description of the

³ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

gas-charged waters of Boiling-Spring River; a sketch of a settlement of "mountain-men" married to Spanish women from Taos; a discussion of the passes of the Rockies and the general ignorance of them since the Indians had slain so many mountain-men; a brief comparison of Kit Carson and Alexis Godey as scouts; a note on the food value of the yampa plant; and a summary of the available information on the Grand Canyon of the Colorado as he pieced it together from vague tales by trappers and Indians. So the report proceeds. Frémont included frequent descriptions of natural scenes, recommendations for military posts and settlements, thumb-nail sketches of everything from geysers to grizzlies, and random remarks on such subjects as the effect of brandy taken on a cold night after a hard day's march.

He even inserted entertaining bits of frontier gossip. Writing of the Great Salt Lake, he paused to describe a little insect larva which was washed up in great numbers on the shore:

Alluding to this subject some months afterwards, when travelling through a more southern portion of this region, in company with Mr. Joseph Walker, an old hunter, I was informed by him that, wandering with a party of men in a mountain country east of the great California range, he surprised a party of several Indian families encamped near a small salt lake, who abandoned their lodges at his approach, leaving everything behind them. Being in a starving condition, they were delighted to find in the abandoned lodges a number of skin bags, containing a quantity of what appeared to be fish, dried and pounded. On this they made a hearty supper, and were gathering round an abundant breakfast the next morning, when Mr. Walker discovered that it was with these, or a similar worm, that the bags had been filled. The stomachs of the stout trappers were not proof against their prejudices, and the repulsive food was suddenly rejected.

The appreciation of natural beauty which had marked the first report was again prominent. On the far-widened Platte during the outward journey, "when at night the broad expanse of water grew indistinct, it almost seemed that we had pitched

our tents on the shore of the sea." A little later he exulted in the morning beauty of the massive peaks Rainier and St. Helen's, "the snow being entirely covered with a hue of rosy gold." He wrote poetically of the hopes attached to the mythical Buenaventura, "where in the softer climate of a more southern latitude our horses might find grass to sustain them, and ourselves be sheltered from the rigors of winter and from the inhospitable desert." The high Sierras (after he had gotten safe over them) excited his admiration: "Immediately above the eastern mountains was repeated a cloud-formed mass of purple ranges, bordered with bright yellow gold; the peaks shot up into a narrow line of crimson cloud, above which the air was filled with a greenish orange; and over all was the singular beauty of the blue sky." Even more was he pleased with the descent into California, with its towering trees, green grass, clouds of brilliant butterflies, and blooming shrubs, among which the high blue lupin was prominent: "A lover of natural beauty can imagine with what pleasure we rode among these flowering groves, which filled the air with a light and delicate fragrance." He wrote later of the forests, "the summer green of their beautiful foliage, with the singing birds, and the sweet summer wind which was whirling about the dry oak-leaves, nearly intoxicated us with delight."

Again his pages were rich in human touches. When his party met the large red ox wandering back on the Oregon Trail, they gathered about him "with all their domestic feelings as much aroused as if we had come in sight of an old farmhouse"; and Frémont would not have him touched, "for I would rather have gone through a starving-time of three days than let him be killed after he had successfully run the gauntlet so far among the Indians." He and his men, encountering a Shoshone village, wished to exchange cloth, vermilion, and trinkets for food, but found the savages miserably poor. "Several of the Indians drew aside their blankets, showing me their lean and bony figures; and I would not any longer tempt them with a display of our merchandise to part with their wretched sub-

sistence." He could look at himself humorously. Take his half-rueful description of the aspect of the second expedition as it turned back from California:

Our cavalcade made a strange and grotesque appearance; and it was impossible to avoid reflecting upon our position and composition in this remote solitude. Within two degrees of the Pacific Ocean—already far south of the latitude of Monterey—and still forced on south by a desert on one hand, and a mountain range on the other—guided by a civilized Indian, attended by two wild ones from the Sierra—a Chinook from the Columbia, and our mixture of American, French, German—all armed—four or five languages heard at once—above a hundred horses and mules, half wild—American, Spanish, and Indian dresses and equipment intermingled—such was our composition. Our march was a sort of procession. Scouts ahead and on the flanks; a front and rear division; the pack-animals, baggage, and horned cattle in the centre; and the whole stretching a quarter of a mile along our dreary path. In this form we journeyed, looking more as if we belonged to Asia than to the United States of America.

Frémont was glad to emphasize the practicability of the Oregon Trail, though he did not gloss over the difficulties of many stretches—shortage of grass and water; rough and rocky roads; difficult fords; numerous short, steep ascents, exhausting the worn-out animals. He was glad also to dissipate the impression, fostered in some quarters by publications of the day, that the Pacific Northwest was a harsh, repellent country. A book published in London in 1844 by an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company, John Dunn, called *History of the Oregon Territory and North American Fur Trade*, had contained many misrepresentations. It declared that no route existed from the Eastern States to Oregon which could ever furnish facilities for a large overland flow of emigrants; that for hundreds of miles the trails wound over barren ground, where scorching heat alternated with bitter cold; and that west of the Rockies, the country was broken by towering cliffs, deep ravines, and rapid streams, while the travelers had to toil through deep sand or

over sharp basaltic rocks. The ornithologist J. K. Townsend, who had accompanied Nathaniel Wyeth's second expedition to Oregon, and had published a *Narrative* of it in Philadelphia in 1839, had much exaggerated the difficulties of the Trail—the craggy mountains, burning sun, and parching winds. Frémont told the truth about the trail. He also reported that his friend Gilpin came back from the Willamette settlements with invigorated health, “highly pleased with the country.”⁴

A dry government report would have done little to dispel the vague terrors many connected with the Oregon Trail, to advertise the value of the Columbia River country, and to call attention to the attractions of California. But this narrative, always readable, frequently engrossing, and published at the most propitious moment, carried its message home. Frémont completed it late in February, 1845; on March 1st he formally presented it to the War Department; and on March 3rd a Senate resolution called for printing five thousand extra copies. Buchanan, who was shortly to become Secretary of State, told the Senate that he had watched Frémont's progress with interest, “and was satisfied that he was a young gentleman of extraordinary merit, great energy, and ability to serve the country. He deserved encouragement.” He (Buchanan) would therefore move to increase the number of copies to be printed from five thousand to ten thousand. The motion carried.⁵ Various commercial publishers in America and England took up the report and in the next half dozen years printed

⁴ It is to be noted that he also contributed greatly to general knowledge of the Great Basin. This term, forever afterward fixed upon the region, he invented; and he gave an accurate description of that part of the Basin which he had seen: “It is called a desert, and from what I saw of it, sterility may be its prominent characteristic; but where there is so much water there must be some oasis . . . ; where there is so much snow there must be streams; and where there is no outlet there must be lakes to hold the accumulated waters, or sands to swallow them up.” For warm tributes to Frémont's scientific work upon the Great Basin, see Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, pp. 270, 271; Gilbert, *The Exploration of Western America, 1800-1850*, p. 175. The latter truly states that “The expeditions of Frémont between the years 1842 and 1853 explained the real nature of the Great Basin.”

⁵ *Congressional Globe*, March 3, 1845.

large editions, some running into thousands of copies. From that day to this no one in the United States has ever had any difficulty in procuring it at little cost. The newspapers seized upon it and printed copious extracts. Frémont found himself one of the heroes of the hour, holding such a place in the popular imagination as Hobson, Admiral Byrd, and Colonel Lindbergh later gained.

He was especially gratified to receive from President Tyler, at the instance of General Winfield Scott, a double-brevet as first lieutenant and captain "for gallant and highly meritorious services in two expeditions commanded by himself." He was pleased also by an invitation to dinner from Daniel Webster, who was deeply interested in California. Webster believed that San Francisco Bay and other Pacific ports should by all means be made American—they were "twenty times as valuable to us as all Texas"—but despite Frémont's protests, he thought the interior of California almost valueless.

Misapprehensions as to the West, in fact, died hard. Soon after Polk's inauguration, Benton took his son-in-law to the White House to meet the narrow, precise, hardworking President, and to lend support to Benton's views on the value of the Far West. Frémont gave Polk a brief account of his observations in Oregon and California, dilating upon the value of these areas. To illustrate the prevailing ignorance of the western slope, he remarked that he had recently drawn from the map-stand in the Library of Congress a map which represented the Great Salt Lake as connected with the Pacific by three large rivers; one emptying into the Columbia, one into the Gulf of California, and one flowing west through the Sierra Nevada into San Francisco Bay! He explained that trappers had given the geographers inexact and conflicting information, which, combined with some known facts and such fables as that regarding the Buenaventura (which dated back to Father Escalante), resulted in such ridiculous maps. His remarks were intended to illustrate the propriety of giving the West still more of such scientific examination as he had been furnishing. But

the conservative Polk was not impressed. He evidently held the map-makers in high respect. "Like the Secretary [of the Navy]," writes Frémont,⁶ "he found me 'young,' and said something of the 'impulsiveness of young men,' and was not at all satisfied in his own mind that these three rivers were not running there as laid down." The explorer came away somewhat glum.

Political events had meanwhile been moving with great rapidity. When Frémont reached St. Louis from the West, the presidential campaign of 1844, with Polk pitted against Clay, was in full swing. Neither the little-known Democratic candidate nor the Democratic plank for the acquisition of Texas appealed to Benton. He believed that Van Buren had been entitled to the nomination, and was convinced that the annexation of Texas meant an unjust war for the benefit of the slaveholders. The Democratic plank for the "reoccupation" of Oregon met his wishes, though he was always ready to see the boundary drawn on the forty-ninth parallel, and to give vigorous opposition in the Senate to the blatant "Fifty-four Forties," led by Cass, Allen, and Hannegan. That fall the election of Polk gave the country an expansionist President, and the opening of Congress in December, 1844, showed that sentiment for new territorial acquisitions ran high. Before the session ended Texas had been annexed by joint resolution, Benton casting a silent vote in its favor. It was generally believed that war in Mexico would soon result. But Polk hoped for the best; his diary reveals that a few months later the Cabinet decided to negotiate with Mexico in an effort to settle the Texan boundary question, and in addition "to procure the cession of New Mexico and California and if possible all north of latitude 32 from the Passo on the Del Norte (El Paso) and west to the Pacific or (if that failed) then the next best boundary which might be practicable, so as at all events to include all the country east of the Del Norte, and the Bay of San Francisco."

Benton, of course, strongly approved of this decision. He be-

⁶ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 412, 418.

lieved with all his usual fervor of conviction that the United States and Mexico ought to be close friends, and that America should act as aid and protector to the weak Hispanic-American nations. It would be shameful, he held, to assail Mexico with predatory aims. But he was convinced that California, New Mexico, and a satisfactory Texan boundary could and should be obtained by treaty and purchase. Although he never admired Polk and his Cabinet, his relations with them were close and his advice was frequently sought. Secretary of State Buchanan frequently conferred with the Senator, and Frémont was sometimes included in their conversations. Buchanan was ignorant of Spanish, and his wavering nature found encouragement in Benton's positive character. Often he brought papers from a confidential Mexican agent for translation, and Jessie tells us a bit of "secret history." The Mrs. Greenhow whom she mentions was undoubtedly a versatile spy, who was destined in Civil War days to do good work for the Confederates: ⁷

My sister and myself would make the translations. General Dix (of New York) was on the Military Committee and knew Spanish. He was a near neighbor and congenial friend, and he [Benton] and General Dix would read out a translation to Mr. Buchanan, and afterwards, we (who knew Spanish well) made out the written papers.

The librarian and translator at the State Department Mr. Greenhow of course knew Spanish. But his wife was in the pay of the English legation as a spy, and our private information reached them through her. Mr. Buchanan when he knew this thought best to cut off opportunities but did not betray knowledge of being watched. This is only one of many corroborating bits of circumstantial evidence of constant rivalry and counteraction by England regarding Mexico.

As the Polk Administration thus took over the foreign problems of Tyler, and as Frémont supervised the printing of his report, war clouds thickened.

As soon as Texas was annexed the Mexican Minister, Señor

⁷ Undated Memorandum, Huntington Library.

J. N. Almonte, immediately protested in terms which carried a threat of resistance; and his government broke off diplomatic relations. When the Mexican press learned early in July that Texas had accepted the American terms of annexation, a burst of passion shook the higher circles of the republic. "Union or war!" was the watchword enunciated by various newspapers. Public indignation compelled the Executive to lay the question of war before Congress. An army was mobilized, money was appropriated, and steps were taken to raise fifteen million dollars. Fresh guns were mounted at Vera Cruz and the fortress prepared for an attack; munitions and provisions were accumulated at Matamoras on the northern border; from many points came news of the mustering of troops. Before midsummer Mexico notified her ministers in London and Paris that she intended to appeal to arms. In Washington, that well-informed observer Baron Gerolt, who had long been Prussian minister in Mexico City, believed that war was imminent and so informed Secretary Bancroft. But still for a time the apparently inevitable outbreak was postponed. The United States, with Polk grimly hoping for peace, took a passive attitude, waiting for Mexico to provoke the first clash. In Mexico City a short-lived government arose under General Herrera, and—apparently anxious for peace at any price—hinted to Polk that a minister would be received.

In short, throughout the spring of 1845, while Frémont was preparing for his third expedition, and talking with Benton of the situation, American leaders were highly uncertain of the future. At any moment the Mexican army, acting on the theory that Texas was merely a rebellious Mexican province, might cross the border and begin hostilities. Polk had despatched a confidential agent, William S. Parrott, to Mexico City to attempt to smooth over the difficulties, and had authorized him to promise liberal payments for a satisfactory boundary. How far the Administration would have gone in this direction is shown by the fact that when it sent John Slidell to Mexico in the autumn as the new minister, he was instructed to offer forty

millions for a good settlement. But Parrott was received abusively by the Mexican press and accomplished nothing. Rumors of conflict persisted; news of preparations by the Mexican Government continued to flow north. Various European powers manifested their concern over the possibility of war, which they knew would result in American aggrandizement, and in no unselfish spirit made it known that they would be glad to use their friendly offices. There was talk—which our diplomatic representative in London in March, 1845, took very seriously—of setting up a monarchy in Mexico under some European prince.

It is important, in view of Frémont's later actions, to note that this fear of early hostilities with Mexico was accompanied by widespread apprehensions of unfriendly action by Great Britain. In these years men like Calhoun were almost hypnotized by a belief that England would at any favorable moment turn aggressor in the western hemisphere. Into the intricate mesh of foreign relations involving England, France, the United States, Mexico, Texas, and Oregon we cannot possibly go. It is sufficient to say that in 1844 great numbers of Americans believed that war with England over Oregon and other issues was unescapable; and that even when Polk took office, he felt that "no compromise [upon Oregon] to which Great Britain would accede, could pass the Senate," and that a conflict was at hand. It should also be said that during 1844-45 a persistent rumor was current that Great Britain intended to seize California. We know now that this rumor was quite unfounded, but a multitude of Americans took the supposed British threat in that quarter as a grim reality. Polk was one, and he made his fears of British occupation of California a foundation-stone of his foreign policy. Benton was another, for his attitude toward the British Government had always been stiff and suspicious. All informed men knew that California was a derelict craft, ready to be picked up by any captain who would take it into the port of a strong and stable government. Frémont had described to Benton how this beautiful and fertile region was hanging like

a ripe fruit, ready to break from its stem at a touch. Its forests, fields, and harbors, and teeming fisheries were almost unused; the greatest part of it was lying waste, a mere Indian country, receiving not even a dribble of Mexican colonization. Of its white population, hardly yet sufficient to fill a thriving township, the native Californians were disloyal and discontented, while the fast-growing American group was only biding its time until it should rebel. Plots and intrigues swept the scattered settlements as eddies of wind sweep an exposed pond.

This fear of British action explains much that occurred in Washington in 1845-46. When Slidell went to Mexico City he was told to say that the United States could not allow California to fall into other hands, and to offer twenty-five millions for Upper California and New Mexico. George Bancroft, the new Secretary of the Navy, was as eager as his chief to obtain the whole Southwest, and indeed, his zeal for the acquisition of California was older than Polk's. Jessie's words about that lifelong spy Mrs. Greenhow indicate the suspicions that were rife in the Benton circle. Long afterwards Frémont wrote: ⁸

As affairs resolved themselves, California stood out as the chief subject in the impending war; and with Mr. Benton and other governing men at Washington it became a firm resolve to hold it for the United States.... This was talked over fully during the time of preparation for the third expedition, and the contingencies anticipated and weighed.

Supported by Benton's powerful influence as chairman of the Senate Military committee, by Secretary Bancroft, and by his own prestige, Frémont found no difficulty in obtaining the approval of the War Department for a third expedition. Apparently Benton and Bancroft were responsible for the de-

⁸ Frémont, *Memoirs*, pp. 423, 424. Frémont also writes: "Mexico, at war with the United States, would inevitably favor English protection for California. English citizens were claiming indemnity for loans and indemnity for losses." He states that to Benton, Bancroft, and others "it seemed reasonably sure that California would eventually fall to England or the United States, and that the eventuality was near."

cision that it should carry him far into Mexican territory. He was instructed to explore

that section of the Rocky Mountains which gives rise to the Arkansas River, the Rio Grande del Norte of the Gulf of Mexico, and the Rio Colorado of the Gulf of California; to complete the examination of the Great Salt Lake and its interesting region; and to extend the survey west and southwest to the examination of the Cascade Mountains and the Sierra Nevada.

All this pointed straight toward California. His explorations in the Great Salt Lake region and Sierra Nevada were expected to open a shorter southern route for travel to California; the examination of the Cascades was expected to show an easy means of travel between Oregon and the interior of northern California. Such roads, useful in peace, would be equally useful in hostilities. And "in arranging this expedition," Frémont subsequently wrote, "the eventualities of war were taken into consideration." He meant that his trails were expected to be useful to armed forces; perhaps he also meant that Benton and Bancroft envisaged the possibility that when he reached California, his exploring band might be transformed into a hard-fighting company.

In his *Memoirs* Frémont unfortunately treats this aspect of his third expedition without detail or corroborative documents. He asserts that Bancroft took a leading part in the plan for combining scientific and military objects:

Imbued with the philosophy of history, his mind was alive to the bearing of the actual conditions, and he knew how sometimes skill and sometimes bold action determine the advantages of a political situation; and in this his great desire was to secure for the United States the important one that hung in the balance. In the government at Washington he was the active principle, having the activity of brain and keen perception that the occasion demanded. With him Mr. Benton had friendly personal relations of long standing.

Certainly Bancroft later claimed for himself the rôle of "active principle" of the government in plans relating to California, a region which he made his special charge. The Secretary, now almost forty-six and nationally known by his historical writings, was a man of enormous energy and a sincere believer in expansion. Throwing himself into the administration of the navy, though it was an uncongenial post, he had resolved to use his Cabinet influence to gain fresh territory and to improve sectional relations. California seemed to fall within his province as a possible bone of contention between the British and American navies.

Frémont states that his associates believed that if Mexico went to war with the United States, she would ask for British protection of California; that "our relations with England were already clouded, and in the event of war with Mexico, if not anticipated by us, an English fleet would certainly take possession of San Francisco Bay." Though we now know that no such danger existed, it is doubtless true that Polk, Benton, Bancroft, and others strongly feared it. Frémont adds: "My private instructions were, if needed, to foil England by carrying the war now imminent with Mexico into the territory of California." Unfortunately, he does not say under just what circumstances or in just what words Secretary Bancroft gave him these "private instructions"; nor does he mention the fact that Bancroft was not his official superior. Later, we shall record Bancroft's own statements endorsing those of Frémont. But we must note that Secretary of War Marcy, in his annual report at the close of 1846, declared that the objects of the captain's third expedition "were, as those of his previous explorations had been, of a scientific character, without any view whatever to military operations." It is difficult to avoid the view that Frémont served two masters: the War Department, which thought of the purposes of his work as purely scientific, and Senator Benton and Secretary Bancroft, who had ulterior political objects for it.

Once more Frémont set off westward in May to recruit his

company in St. Louis, obtain stores, and begin his march before spring ended. This time his corps was larger than before—sixty-two men; better armed; and more mobile, for it dispensed with carts. War was to overtake it. As war did so, it was destined to play a more dramatic and controversial rôle than any other expedition of the kind in American annals; a rôle which seemed at the time to change history, and which is even yet wrapped in partial mystery, and the subject of vigorous dispute.

XV

The Third Expedition

IN St. Louis, Frémont met some amusing difficulties in selecting his company from the crowd of applicants. The St. Louis *Weekly Reveille* of June 9, 1845, remarks:

Yesterday we found ourselves, with others, near the enclosure opposite the Planters' Warehouse, endeavoring to hear what Capt. Frémont's ideas were in relation to his contemplated mountain expedition. He was, at the time, attempting to address a motley crowd of French, Irish, Dutch, and Mountain men, to the number of several hundred, who had surrounded and were importuning him to obtain the much desired "diamond gudgeon" of this government affair. The Captain was disposed to gratify them, and accordingly mounted the most convenient rostrum—which was near—the old rickety fence which bounds the enclosure. He had commenced and was going on with his remarks, which could not be heard, however, excepting by those who were immediately crowding round him, when a sudden pressure of the crowd broke down the fence and over went the crowd, Captain, and all embracing their mother earth. About this time, a well-meaning Irishman, who had been standing on the corner of Second Street, not knowing what all the fuss was about, rushed up with the idea that it was a "big fight," shouting at the top of his lungs, "Fair play! Fair play! and be d——d to yez; don't you see the man's down?"

Later, the reporter heard fragmentary sentences of Frémont's speech. "Those who desire to go—fifty men—good riflemen and packers—been to the mountains before—are not such—discharge them before I get up." He says that Frémont's description of the hardships "took the starch out of many a good fellow."

Frémont had purchased a dozen of the finest rifles on the market, and offered them to his corps as prizes for the best marksmanship.¹ Obviously, sixty men were an excessive force for a mere topographical party, and sharpshooting is not a topographical necessity. The party included many of Frémont's old comrades, among them the two distinguished frontiersmen, Joseph Walker and Alexis Godey; the Captain's favorite French voyageur and aide, Basil Lajeunesse; the hunter Lucien Maxwell, and Theodore Talbot of Washington. This time twelve Delaware Indians, good hunters, and brave men, were taken along. Lieutenant Abert of the Topographical Corps, a relative of its head, and James McDowell, a nephew of Jessie's, were members. Frémont found that the horses and mules which he had left pasturing near the site of the future Kansas City were in fine condition, fat and rested.

One man was conspicuous by his absence: Preuss, whose wife had persuaded him to buy a comfortable home in Washington and insisted that he remain there, though he ardently longed to rejoin Frémont.² His place was taken by Edward M. Kern, of Philadelphia, who had eagerly applied for the post; a gay, headstrong young artist whose skill in sketching from nature, and in drawing and coloring birds and plants, made him a valuable addition to the party. Kern was to play a rôle in California far more important than any one dreamed. As for Carson, Frémont had no sooner reached Bent's Fort on August 3rd than he sent a messenger post-haste from it to the scout's new ranch on the Cimarron, east across the mountains from Taos, where Carson and Richard Owens were launching into stock-raising on a large scale. Kit was tilling, planting, and building with the zeal of a man who, now tired of roving, happily married, and with children in prospect, hoped to settle down to a life of quiet industry. But though he had resolved to change his mode of life, the message from Frémont instantly caused him to abandon his plans. His ranching enterprise had

¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 424.

² Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

been contingent upon a promise to Frémont that he would come at any call. He gave up much—"This was like Carson, prompt, self-sacrificing, and true," writes Frémont. But he loved adventure and activity, the government pay was sure while ranching was precarious, and without delay, he disposed of his ranch, placing his young wife Josefa with friends. The willing Owens accompanied him to Fort Bent.³

It was sufficient recommendation for Owens that he was Carson's friend. "Cool, brave, and of good judgment," says Frémont in his *Memoirs*; "a good hunter and good shot; experienced in mountain life, he was an acquisition, and proved valuable throughout the campaign." Indeed, upon three men, Carson, Owens, and Godey, Frémont in the anxious days just ahead placed his chief reliance. They were shrewd, quick, and resolute. Under Napoleon, said the young leader, they might have become marshals. Within a year, Owens was to be captain of the first company of Colonel Frémont's First California Battalion, and in that capacity to distinguish himself by valiant and loyal service.

August was drawing to a close when the explorer, with his sixty men, two hundred horses, and a few cattle for food, rode westward from Bent's Fort in a heavy cloud of dust. Abert was no longer with him, having led a smaller detachment on a reconnaissance into northern Texas, whence he was to turn east to the lower Arkansas River, and then return up the Mississippi to St. Louis. The young Brevet Captain was in absolute command of what was to all effects a little army. His order to march marked the beginning of two crowded years whose adventures, perils, triumphs, and humiliations were to make him one of the most famous figures of his generation.

Until the expedition reached the eastern foothills of the Sierras, its journey was uneventful and prosperous. The first marches were up the Arkansas Valley into the heart of Colorado. The party crossed the plains in the delightful weather of late summer, and the men found them beautiful, with the coun-

³ Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 384.

try fresh and green, broken by aspen groves, pine woods, and clear, cool streams rushing over rocky beds. Early in September, they were on the shores of the Great Salt Lake, where Frémont spent almost a fortnight sketching the geographical features of the country, taking astronomical observations, and making careful explorations. He found great beds of mineral or rock salt; traversed the environs of the lake on horseback; and at Antelope Island, near its southern extremity, had an interesting encounter with a grizzled old Ute chief, who declared himself the owner of the game thereabouts, and required Frémont to pay him in red cloth, tobacco, and hardware for the meat he had taken.⁴

West of Salt Lake, the course seemed to lie over a flat, arid plain, concerning which neither Walker nor Carson knew anything whatever, and which no white man save the ubiquitous Jedediah Smith had ever crossed. The Indians declared that they knew of no one who had traversed it, and that parties had ventured far out without finding a drop of water anywhere. But Frémont thought of a shrewd expedient. At the far edge of the desert, sixty miles away, faintly loomed a high-peaked mountain, which looked verdurous, and which he thought he could safely reach. He arranged that Carson, Lucien Maxwell, and two others should set out in the coolness of the night, taking a pack mule with water, and make the mountain by a single forced march. On the following day, Frémont and his companions should follow more leisurely, try to reach a halfway point, and wait for a smoke signal in the event that Carson discovered a spring or stream. Two days later the whole expedition was at the foot of the peak, where it found water, grass, and wood abundant, and where the animals could be turned loose.⁵ Frémont called the friendly mountain Pilot Peak. Be-

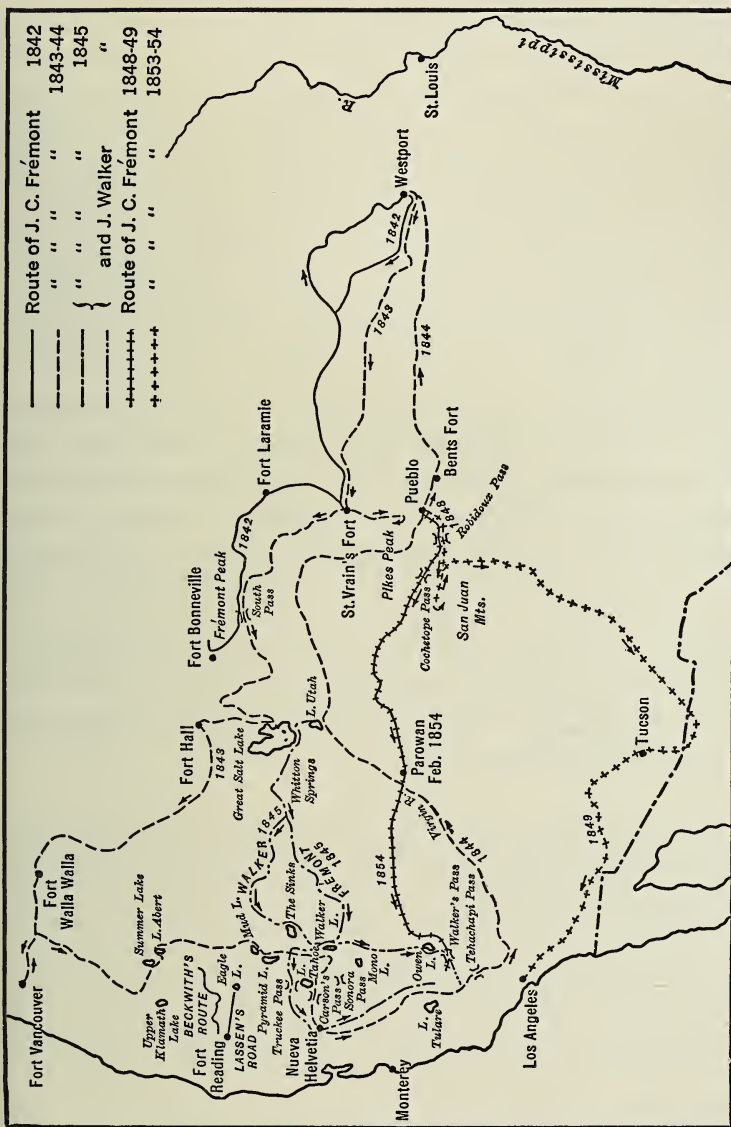
⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 431.

⁵ Carson writes in his *Own Story* of this desert: "It had never before been crossed by white men. I was often here. Old trappers would speak of the impossibility of crossing, that water could not be found, grass for the animals, there was none. Frémont was bound to cross. Nothing was impossible for him to perform if required in his explorations."

ginning the next year, it was used as guide-mark by a number of emigrant parties. This briefer route west of Great Salt Lake was called the Hastings Cut-off, after its discoverer, Lansford W. Hastings, who in 1845 had published *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*. But after 1846 emigration over it was rare. Frémont's horses had now become what the voyageurs called *resté*, having reached a point at which they were easily overfatigued; but the mules, however tired at night, needed only plenty of good grass and water to be as fresh as ever in the morning.

At the beginning of November the expedition, finding easy passes from valley to valley, continued its journey westward across Nevada. It was an arid region, but they spread scouts out over the country on every day's march, and seldom had difficulty in finding a comfortable camping place by some stream or spring. When Frémont reached the picturesque river which had theretofore been called the Ogden, after the famous fur trader Peter Skene Ogden, but which he renamed the Humboldt in honor of the great geographer, he divided his party. One body, under Kern, was to follow the Humboldt to its termination in the Carson Sink, was to go on to the eastern foot of the Sierras, and was then to follow the mountains southward till it reached a body of water which Frémont called Walker's Lake. Frémont had appointed Joseph Walker as guide to the party and felt secure as to its safety, for in following the river and the Sierras it could not go astray, while it would have ample grass and water to keep the animals in good condition throughout its journey.

For himself, the Captain took ten picked men, including several Delawares, Dick Owens, Lucien Maxwell, and Basil Lajeunesse, and set out from the Humboldt River directly across the bed of the Great Basin, westward with a slight inclination to the south. Carson, of course, guided him. By splitting the expedition into two parts, Frémont doubled the information obtained. Since "the winter was now approaching, and I had good reason to know what the snow would be in the Great Sierra,"



FRÉMONT'S FIVE EXPLORING TRIPS, 1842-54

he thought it imprudent to linger longer in examining the Great Basin. But, as Dellenbaugh suggests, if this had been purely an explorative party, it would have been much better for it to spend the winter mapping the almost unknown regions east of the Sierras than to hurry on to the well-known coastal belt of California. Why did he not stay, find a suitable base, and study all the problems of the Great Basin at leisure? The obvious answer is that it was not a mere explorative party. One of its objects was to carry out a military reconnaissance in California, be at hand in that desirable territory if hostilities broke out, and give the American settlers on the Sacramento assurances of aid.⁶

The passage of the Great Basin was dull and eventless, though it added not a little to our geographic knowledge of one of the most obscure parts of America. Once they chanced upon a naked Indian, cooking a stew of sage-brush marmots, pierced with his obsidian arrows, over a sage-brush fire; and though the Delawares would have killed him, Frémont sent him away with a small present. On another occasion they encamped for the night at a spring, supped upon antelope, and were lying about the fire smoking when they were startled by an unexpected apparition. Frémont's record is a good illustration of his eye for the picturesque: ⁷

⁶ For the political background of the third expedition, see W. J. Ghent and Leroy Hafen, *Broken Hand (Thomas Fitzpatrick)*, p. 163ff. As they point out, with war apparently imminent in the Southwest, the Government despatched three expeditions, one of them military, the other two semi-military. "Frémont with sixty well-armed men was to put himself where he could watch developments in California and be ready to act should action seem warranted." Lieutenant James William Abert, with thirty-two men, was to make a reconnaissance through no-man's land. Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, with a force of dragoons, was to march to South Pass and back, warning the Indians on the way that any violence would be punished with promptness and severity. It should be noted that a question of policy was involved in the work of the Kearny expedition: Would the safety of the emigrants be better assured by establishing a chain of forts from the Missouri to the Columbia, or by sending out an occasional force of troops as evidence of the government's power to punish? Frémont favored the line of forts, Kearny the occasional despatch of expeditionary forces; thus early the two officers were at odds.

⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 436, 437.

Carson, who was lying on his back with his pipe in his mouth, his hands under his head, and his feet to the fire, suddenly exclaimed, half rising and pointing to the other side of the fire: "Good God! Look there!" In the blaze of the fire, peering over her skinny, crooked hands, which shaded her eyes from the glare, was standing an old woman apparently eighty years of age, her grizzled hair hanging down over her face and shoulders. She had thought it a camp of her people, and had already begun to talk and gesticulate, when her open mouth was paralyzed with fright, as she saw the faces of the whites. She turned to escape, but the men had gathered about her and brought her around to the fire. Hunger and cold soon dispelled fear, and she made us understand that she had been left by her people at the spring to die, because she was very old and was no longer good for anything. She told us she had nothing to eat and was very hungry. We gave her immediately about a quarter of the antelope, thinking she would roast it by our fire, but no sooner did she get it in her hand than she darted off into the darkness. Some one ran after her with a brand of fire, but calling after her brought no answer.

Frémont's route led through the central portion of Nevada. Striking southwest from Franklin Lake, he skirted what is now known as the Alkali Desert, penetrated Nye County, and proceeded west through Esmeralda County to Walker's Lake, which lies near the western boundary of Nevada, its southern tip just opposite Sacramento. In making this trip, he blazed the most feasible trail of the time across Nevada. Theretofore, maps and geographic texts had represented the whole Great Basin, from the Salt Lake to the Sierras, as a sandy, barren plain, without water or grass. Frémont proved, as he wrote Jessie, that instead of being a plain, it was "traversed by parallel ranges of mountains, their summits white with snow (October); while below, the valleys had none. Instead of a barren country, the mountains were covered with grasses of the best quality, wooded with several varieties of trees, and containing more deer and mountain sheep than we had seen in any previous part of our voyage." Had later events not ob-

scured Frémont's exploratory labors in 1845, these facts would have attracted wide attention.

On November 24th, after this unexciting passage, Frémont found himself at the rendezvous on Walker's Lake, where three days later the main party joined him. The weather was still open and beautiful, but the temperature was growing sharply chill; even during the journey across the Basin the thermometer had stood below the freezing point at sunrise, and now the cold of the grim Sierras, looming above them to the west, was in the air. The members of the expedition were in overflowing spirits and health. But game was becoming scarce as the wild animals denned themselves up or migrated southward for the winter, and their store of provisions was falling low. A brief storm, whitening the lower hills and valleys of the range with a few inches of snow, had warned them of the difficulties if they delayed. Frémont was not far from the point where he had forced a crossing of the Sierras the previous winter, and meant to conquer them again at once. He knew that heavy snows might be expected at any moment to block the passages; and that if they came, he could not possibly extricate his baggage. He therefore resolved again to divide his party, sending the main body and impedimenta under Kern south along the Sierras until, opposite southern California, they could pass through open valleys, known to Walker, where snow was rarely or never seen. He himself would go directly over the mountains, and the two companies would reunite at the Lake Fort of the Tulare Lake.

Leaving behind him the Great Basin, which he had branded with "the Frémont irons"—Humboldt River and Mountains, Basil Creek, Sagundai Spring, Walker's River and Lake, Owens Lake—he successfully carried out this program. With fifteen selected men, at the beginning of December he reached the Salmon Trout River flowing into Pyramid Lake, and four days later was standing on the east side of a feasible pass in the Sierras. This may have been Truckee or Donner's Pass; the pass he had used in 1844 lay on his left. He had succeeded

in his effort to reach the divide before the first heavy fall of snow. Nervous even yet lest the party be overtaken by a blizzard, he kept a close watch all night on December 4th, so that at the first swirl of snowflakes they might hurry over the crest before it was too late. Happily the sky continued clear, and when they gained the summit the only snow visible was that shining on the high peaks above. Reaching the middle of the divide, they found the temperature surprisingly mild—only 22 degrees—and began the descent into the warm California plains.

It was again a delightful experience, after the scorched, broken plateau of the Great Basin, to come out into the lovely rolling country just west of the Sierra pinnacles. First they passed through great pine forests, the columns high overtopping any pines of the East or of Europe; then they descended into a region wooded with varieties of oak, bearing an abundance of acorns which the Indians used for food. The long-acorn oak rose to a height of eighty feet, and was frequently six feet in diameter. In the foothills, where rain fell frequently, everything bore a green, well-watered aspect. Small Indian villages were scattered through the oak glades, and Frémont noted their little mills, or rather mortar-holes, for pounding acorns; idyllic spots, where the clean, smooth granite rocks stood out amid the fresh green grass, and the running water pleased the ear and eye. So attractive was the whole region, with its flowers, game, and other temptations to man and beast, that they camped early every afternoon to enjoy it, and so consumed four days in coming down to the Sacramento bottoms.

On December 9, 1845, Frémont was once more approaching the thick adobe walls of Sutter's Fort on the American River, and was being welcomed by the waving hands of the ranch employees, clustered in the gateway. He made camp that night just above the fort. Just behind him lay some of his most important geographical achievements. Circumstances prevented him from ever writing such a report of this third expedition as had followed the first and second, and the world has there-

fore been inclined to ignore his really important accomplishments. Previously a Pathmarker, in this trip across the Nevada desert from east to west, and this passage of the Sierras, he had really been a Pathfinder. As E. L. Sabin succinctly puts it: ⁸

Another joint (the first being the Mary's River) had been found in the armor of the Great Basin. The map submitted by Frémont in 1848, based upon his explorations of 1845, was very different from his map of the Great Basin of 1844. Where much had been white, save for the arching legend "Unknown," now much was etched with physical symbols and place names. And although the Frémont southern route was improved upon and shortened by later explorations, although, in consequence of the California troubles, his feat of 1845 received less notice by the world and was less exploited by himself than his previous feats, he really pioneered a permanent feasible trail between the Salt Lake and Northern California. Moreover, he and his stalwarts were the first white men, as he rightfully asserts, to make a survey of this, the prospector's end of Nevada, long thereafter to be terra incognita save to the emigrant, the stage, the pack animals, the Mormon station-keepers, the treasure delver, and the wandering Indian.

With the long westward march completed, with his camp pitched not far from Sutter's Fort, there opened one of the most eventful chapters of his history. He little realized then that, as he wrote later, "my way of life had led out from among the grand and lovely features of Nature, and its pure and wholesome air, into the poisoned atmosphere and jarring circumstances of conflict among men, made subtle and malignant by clashing interests."

⁸ *Kit Carson Days*, I, pp. 396, 397.

XVI

A Clash with Californians

ON December 10, 1845, Frémont rode down from his camp to Sutter's Fort, where he found the robust Swiss proprietor absent, and John Bidwell (who had reached California with the Bartleson-Bidwell party in 1841) in charge. To the Captain, requesting various supplies, rough-spoken Bidwell seemed unfriendly. He offered to find some horses, but said that he could not furnish the sixteen mules which Frémont needed; he would lend him the blacksmith shop, but declared there was no coal for the forge. Frémont erroneously concluded that since the Mexican and American governments were drifting toward war, and Sutter was an officer of the former and he of the latter, the men at Sutter's Fort had received orders to do as little as possible for him. Indeed, the Captain had just learned that his previous visit to California had created, as he writes, "some excitement among the Mexican authorities." Americans on the Sacramento informed him that soon after he left Sutter's Fort in the spring of 1844, a Mexican officer and twenty-four men had ridden up from the coast to inquire in Governor Micheltorena's name the meaning of this sudden armed entry into the country. Made uneasy by the news, the Captain now feared trouble.¹ But he soon learned that Sutter was as friendly and hospitable as ever. On his return next day the good Swiss set to work; he promptly found fourteen mules, and furnished cattle, horses, and other supplies; while at the same time he sent word to the commander in

¹ Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, p. 441, indicate clearly that he had just now heard of the alarm of 1844 among the Mexican authorities. But he might have learned of it in Washington; Consul Larkin had reported it by a despatch of April 12, 1844, to the State Department (State Department Archives).

northern California, General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, that the American party had arrived and wished to rest and refit in a mild climate.

Much had occurred in California since Frémont left it in the spring of 1844. A revolt against Micheltorena, led by Juan B. Alvarado and José Castro, had broken out in the autumn of that year, and though a number of Americans under Sutter and Isaac Graham had given listless aid to the governor, he had been compelled to surrender in February, 1845. He agreed to depart with his disorderly retainers, and next month did so. With him went the last effective traces of Mexican rule, and even the shadow of allegiance endured but a few months longer. California was now in all practical respects a little independent republic. The government was divided between a civil and a military chief, Pio Pico holding sway as governor from Los Angeles, and José Castro as military commandant from Monterey.² The old antagonisms between north and south, accentuated by personal rivalries, naturally reappeared; difficulties arose over revenues, and while Pico had legislation drafted favorable to his aims, Castro controlled the treasury and custom-house at Monterey in a way promoting his own. Renewed civil war was sooner or later a certainty unless the lowering conflict between Mexico and the United States supervened. Sutter and the other Americans in California were watching the situation uneasily, fearing that they might be disastrously involved—some of them fearing also that Great Britain might be invited by one party or the other to intervene.³

Delaying only a few days at the Fort, Frémont on December 14th marched south, driving his cattle and horses with him,

² T. H. Hittell, *History of California*, II, p. 346ff. Sutter joined Micheltorena with a hundred riflemen, including such Americans as O'Farrell, Hensley, and Bidwell, and a considerable force of armed Indians.

³ The Americans had still other fears. By orders from Mexico dated June 10th, and published in California September 12th, the immigration of foreigners without passports was to be halted; Castro had soon afterward warned Americans that unless they obtained regular license to hold lands as Mexican citizens, they would have to leave. Frémont must have been told of all this as soon as he arrived. Sabin *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 398.

to find the main body under Kern, Talbot, and Joseph Walker from which he had separated on the shores of Walker's Lake. Though he had but sixteen men, he gained confidence from the fact that when the parties reunited he would possess sixty, all well mounted and each armed with "three to six guns, rifles, and pistols." He was not afraid of the Californians, still less of the Indians. Indeed, as he rode southward along the San Joaquin Valley he undertook to teach a lesson to the thievish savages who had so troubled his march in 1844. A desultory warfare was constantly being waged between these Indians on one side, and all Californians—native *rancheros*, Mexican officers, American settlers—on the other. Frémont in his *Memoirs* aptly describes the situation:

The Horsethief tribes had been "Christian Indians" of the Missions, and when these were broken up by Mexico the Indians took to the mountains. Knowing well the coast country, and the exact situation of the missions where they had lived and the ranchos and the range which their horses were accustomed to, they found it easy to drive off the animals into the mountains, partly to use as saddle-horses, but principally to eat.

In time they became a scourge to the settlements. The great ranges which belonged with the ranchos not only supported many thousands of cattle, but also many hundreds of horses which were divided into bands, "*manadas*." The Indians were the vaqueros or herdsmen who attended to both; herding the cattle and breaking in the colts. The Californians had great pleasure in their horses. On some ranchos there would be several hundred saddle-horses, in bands of eighty or a hundred of different colors; *Alazan* (sorrel) always the favorite color. Deprived of their favorite food, the Indians took to the mountains and began to drive off horses. Cattle would not drive fast enough to avoid the first pursuit. In their early condition they had learned to eat wild horsemeat and liked it. Familiarity with the whites and the success of their predatory excursions made the Horsethief Indians far more daring and braver than those who remained in fixed villages....

Carson had fought these raiding Indians in the San Joaquin Valley in 1830, and Sutter had led an expedition against them

in 1844. Now Frémont's little band had a series of encounters with them; as he wrote his wife, "we . . . got among the Horse-thieves (Indians who lay waste the California frontier) . . . and fought our way down into the plain again and back to Sutter's. Tell your father that I have something handsome to tell him of some exploits of Carson and Dick Owens, and others." In the first clash the Indians, as he tells the story, were the aggressors, and nearly cut off Owens, Maxwell, and two Delawares; in the second Maxwell fought a successful duel with an Indian before Frémont could gallop up. Perhaps this fighting was unavoidable, but it suggests that Frémont felt a more aggressive temper than in 1844, and was not unwilling to take up a quarrel of the American settlers.

The main object of this trip southward was unsuccessful; his search along the San Joaquin Valley as far as the headwaters of Tulare Lake Fork failed to reveal the Talbot-Kern detachment. Frémont was disconcerted but not alarmed, for he knew that the party was too strong to have met with any disaster, and concluded that they had loitered along the way to hunt the abundant game. Thus reassuring himself, he turned northward again to Sutter's Fort, a convenient headquarters until Kern could rejoin him, reaching it January 14, 1846.

His plan was to take the expedition, as soon as it was reunited, up the eastern branch of the Sacramento, past Klamath Lake, and on into the lovely Willamette Valley. He would thus have blazed a new, shorter, and as he believed far superior road from the Missouri River into Oregon. He wrote Jessie on January 24th that he could travel from the Fontaine qui Bouit River to the Sacramento in thirty-five days or less, over a road materially better for wagons than any then in use—a road which made use of the grass, wood, and abundant deer and mountain sheep he had found in parts of the Great Basin; while from Sutter's Fort he could push on north by an admirable natural highway, instead of the rocky, mountainous path which emigrants on the Oregon Trail took down the Snake and the Columbia. His letter bubbled over with pride in his

new road; with pride also in his discovery that much of the supposedly desert Great Basin was green and fertile; and with hopes of the future. He spoke only of errands of peace, and of his happiness in having accomplished so much of his task. "So soon as the proper season comes, and my animals are rested, we turn our faces homeward, and be sure that grass will not grow under our feet. All our people are well . . . and I hope to be able to bring back with me all that I carried out. Many months of hardship, close trials, and anxieties have tried me severely, and my hair is turning gray before its time. But all this passes, *et le bon temps viendra*." ⁴ He seemed to cherish only the prospect of another triumphant report, and quiet fire-side pleasures.

Actually, he could not have failed to give close attention to the uneasy political situation in California, and to ponder the possibility that it might complicate his program. Nor could he have failed to wonder what was occurring beyond the mountains in Washington, beyond the desert in Mexico City. What had actually happened was as momentous to him as to others. The mission of John Slidell to Herrera's government had ended in total failure, and Herrera himself was overthrown by a military politician, Paredes, who took a more belligerent attitude toward the United States. In August, 1845, while Frémont was on his way westward, Zachary Taylor had been ordered to the Nueces River, beyond which lay a strip of land debated by the United States and Mexico. When it became plain that Slidell had failed, Polk on January 13th, as Frémont reapproached Sutter's Fort, directed Taylor to advance to the Rio Grande, thus taking possession of all the debatable area. The intervening territory had never yet been surrendered by Mexico, or effectively occupied by Texas. That step, of course, led directly to war.

Had he wished, Frémont might have waited quietly near Sutter's Fort for the arrival of the Talbot-Kern party, supplied himself with what animals and stores he could obtain there

⁴ This letter is printed in *Memoirs*, I, pp. 452, 453.

and on San Francisco Bay, and pushed on north. The road was easy, game was obtainable, and when spring opened he would be at the Oregon posts, where he could further refit. But his course was different, and it seems plain that he was delaying for news of the Mexican-American situation. He might hear of war; he might receive instructions from Washington for some decisive act. Though he did not know it, a lieutenant of the Marine Corps—Archibald H. Gillespie—was actually on his way through Mexico to California with messages for Sloat and the American consul in Monterey, Thomas O. Larkin, and for Frémont. Speaking Spanish, Gillespie had ample opportunity on his trip through Mexico to learn of the rising sentiment for hostilities and to observe the demonstrations which placed Paredes in power.⁵ While Frémont was not aware Gillespie was coming, he may have anticipated messages from some quarter. Declaring that he needed more camp equipment, he decided to visit some of the principal California settlements. Leaving his men at the Fort, on January 19th he took Sutter's launch down the Sacramento to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), where he spent a few days with the genial American vice-consul, William A. Leidesdorff. Then, equipped with a passport from Sutter, he proceeded southward on horseback to Monterey.

Here, ninety miles below San Francisco,⁶ was the liveliest and most important town in California. Though the seat of civil government had recently been transferred by Pio Pico to the rival town of Los Angeles, the treasury, custom-house, and military headquarters remained here; here, too, stood the ruinous San Carlos Mission, founded by Father Junípero Serra before the American Revolution. It was the strategic center of the

⁵ Gillespie's reports or rather letters to the Secretary of the Navy, February 11, 1846—July 8, 1848, are published by George Walcott Ames, Jr., in "Gillespie and the Conquest of California," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVII (1938), p. 123ff., p. 271ff.

⁶ For clarity we shall hereafter call Yerba Buena, still the merest hamlet, San Francisco. Here, as Bret Harte wrote later, "through the great central valley the Sacramento poured an unstained current into a majestic bay, ruffled by no keels and fretted by no wharves."

territory, and no officer who thought of the possibility of an American conquest would lose an opportunity to familiarize himself with it. The explorer was accompanied by Leidesdorff as he rode down the Santa Clara Valley, a beautiful pastoral region wooded with oak; and his heart must have leaped as, a little after noon on a clear January day, he caught his first glimpse of the town between two low green hills. On the right lay the blue waters of the Bay, with several vessels at anchor; on the left were the scattered one-story buildings, tile-roofed, with a wavering outline of pine-clad hills behind; over all was the sunshine of central California, tempered by a snapping breeze.

Monterey consisted of two or three irregular streets, unlighted, paved only with the deep sea sand, which in the rainy season was better than clay, and bordered by houses of sun-baked adobe. Some of the Spanish homes were elegant in their symmetry and spaciousness, and their low-ceiled, wide, comfortable rooms, built about large patios, were pleasant refuges from the summer heat. All were substantially erected, and looked as if no gale could shake them.⁷ On the bluff above the town stood the fort, with the Mexican flag floating gaily above it; there was a neat and spacious presidio of yellow stone; and a road led over the hills to the former mission of Carmel, four miles distant. As Tamalpais furnished a landmark for the inhabitants of San Francisco, so a high rocky ridge called Toro Mountain, east of the town, made a landmark for the people of Monterey. The atmosphere of the place, cosily ensconced on its spacious bay, was quiet, mellow, and almost purely Spanish. Its natural surroundings were enchanting. It lay at the extremity of a curving fishhook peninsula, facing across its Bay, with the Pacific Ocean, hidden by the pine hills, booming faintly in the distance at its rear. In front, the waves lapped idly about the few wooden wharves; but any one who pushed through the deep green woods behind would come out upon a

⁷ Bayard Taylor, *Eldorado* (Household ed.), p. 133; Walter Colton, *Three Years in California*, pp. 19, 20.

sea which might be very stormy, with the breakers leaping high along its beach. Everywhere in the town the haunting presence of the ocean was felt, its low, distant, thrilling roar hanging over the coast and the inland regions near-by like smoke above a battle-field.⁸

Frémont's first business was to hunt up the American consul, Thomas Larkin, a shrewd, energetic, patriotic Yankee of slender education, whose firm-set jaw impressed the explorer. Larkin, like his compatriots, Abel J. Stearns in Los Angeles and Jacob Leese in Sonoma, had come out to trade, and was well on the way to being the first California millionaire.⁹ He was a confidential agent of the State Department, and a good one. He told Frémont that Governor Pio Pico exercised very little power in the north from his distant capital in Los Angeles. He also told him much more about the troubled, discontented state of the country, with Pio Pico's own seat none too sure; and he took the Captain to pay a formal call upon the commanding General, Don José Castro, upon ex-Governor Alvarado, and upon the Prefect and Alcalde.

Toward these officials, Frémont assumed a deferential and conciliatory attitude. When queried in a formal note by the Prefect, he responded that he was actually not a soldier but an engineer, employed by the Topographical Bureau in making a survey of the briefest route from the eastern states to the Pacific. He came in the interests of science and trade, and his party, whom he had left upon the frontier, were civilians as peaceable as himself. All they asked was what the scientific workers of one nation might justly request of the courtesy of another. Their camp equipment, clothes, tents, and horse-trappings were almost destroyed; they wished merely to replace them and lay in a decent store of provisions. He also suggested that he might like to do a little exploring in the direction of the Colorado River.

⁸ Compare Robert Louis Stevenson's essay on "The Old and New Pacific Capitals."

⁹ Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, p. 337; I have also used R. L. Underhill's scholarly life of Larkin.

To these requests, the Mexicans, polite but plainly suspicious, acceded—at least by tacit consent, for no written reply was made. For a few days Frémont stayed in Monterey with the hospitable Larkin, buying there and in the neighboring country horses, leather goods, food, tents, and some small luxuries for his comrades. He had by this time heard of the whereabouts of his lost party. They had mistaken the place of meeting, which Walker wrongly supposed to be a certain pair of lakes some eighty miles south of the Tulare Lake Fork. For some time he waited there, and then marched northward down the San Joaquin toward Sutter's Fort, till (having heard that Frémont was at San José pueblo, and turned thither), he was found on February 11th by Carson and Dick Owens. The result was that by the middle of the month the whole expedition was reunited on the ranch of the American settler William Fisher some thirteen miles southeast of San José, between San Francisco and Monterey.¹⁰ The men were in good health and spirits, for game had been plentiful, and the animals were fast recuperating. California officials might well have been a little alarmed by this formidable troop of sixty well-armed men now in their very midst; but Pio Pico on February 18th instructed the Prefect, Don Manuel Castro, to content himself with vigilant waiting.

The spot which Frémont had selected for rest and refitting was the Laguna, a vacant ranch owned by the before-mentioned Fisher near the public road through the Santa Clara Valley, only a few miles from the present site of the Lick Observatory. The gentle slopes of the mountains about, the Calaveras and Santa Cruz Ranges, were covered with wild oats, which later in the season rolled in waves of gold, while the soft spring weather had brought a wealth of flowers. Frémont's one objection was that the place was too pleasant and indolent, without "the invigorating salt breezes." Many hard-riding Cali-

¹⁰ Details of this reunion are given in E. M. Kern's *Journal*, printed as an appendix to J. H. Simpson's *Report of Explorations Across the Great Basin of the Territory of Utah*.

forians visited the ranch, and his men became friendly with the polite, hospitable, shiftless people. Americans from the region also came in, among them Dr. John Marsh, Harvard man, physician, and owner of a large ranch. A good deal of rough play enlivened the days, and the men shot at marks, hunted, and tramped the country while Frémont bought more supplies, botanized, and made scientific observations upon the redwoods, madrona, and other trees. He was killing time.

Finally, near the end of February, the expedition broke camp and set out—but not northeast toward the San Joaquin for Oregon or any other northern point, and not southeast toward the Colorado. Instead, they moved to the southwest, on a line which would take the sixty well-armed men through the best-settled parts of California. Santa Cruz and Monterey lay just ahead, but Frémont passed the latter town on the east, camping March 3, 1846, on the Hartnell ranch (owned by an Englishman who had come to the country by way of South America about 1830), some twenty-five miles distant, near the present-day town of Salinas.

Here, as they were resting in the long still afternoon, their camp was thrown into turmoil by the sudden appearance of a Mexican cavalry officer, in tight blue jacket, bright serape, red sash, and buckskin leggings, who, with two men, reined up abruptly before Frémont's tent. He introduced himself as Lieutenant José Antonio Chavez, and the Captain found him rude and curt in speech. Chavez brought two letters, one from General Don José Castro and one from the Prefect, ordering the party instantly to leave California, under penalty of arrest and forcible expulsion. Frémont, irritated by the Lieutenant's manner and offended by the phrasing of the letters, blazed up angrily. He replied that he was equally astonished by the fact that, after solemnly promising his protection to the expedition, Castro should have withdrawn it, and by Castro's use of such rude and peremptory language. He told Chavez that he defied the officials; that he would refuse to obey an order so

insulting to his country and himself, and would leave when he got ready—not before.

In this attitude, Frémont was unquestionably in the wrong, while the Mexican authorities were thoroughly correct. They had a perfect right to dismiss him from California, and possessed good grounds for doing so. Frémont's movement toward the southwest and the coast settlements had no connection with his objects as explorer, was totally unexplained, and was certain to arouse suspicion and fear. He had at least by implication promised not to approach the settlements with his party. In his *Memoirs* he offers the feeble explanation that he desired to inspect the coastal slope with a view to making his home there some time in the future; and that he intended to march to a pass in the coast range, by which he would cross into the interior valley. But if he wished a site for a ranch he might have searched for it alone—better still, have commissioned Larkin to find it. As for crossing the coast range into the San Joaquin Valley, why? Oregon lay in the opposite direction, and one of the main objects of the expedition was to find a better road into Oregon. Frémont was obviously playing for time—obviously waiting for the expected news of war; and the California authorities could simply not tolerate his action.

Moreover, complaints were being made against his men. We may overlook the fact that Don Sebastian Peralta, a ranch-owner near Santa Clara, declared that some of his horses had been taken without payment by the Americans; this was probably a trumped-up charge. But it was a more serious matter when another rancher, an uncle of General Don José Castro himself, reported that three of Frémont's men had burst into his house and frightened the women, one of them even insulting the rancher's daughter.¹¹ The demand now made upon Frémont was stiffly but not insultingly worded. José Castro wrote that he

¹¹ Hittell states that "there does not appear to have been any truth in the report about stolen horses, nor was there any truth in the report of violence offered to the daughters of Angel Castro." *History of California*, II, p. 418. Castro himself later admitted that Frémont had *returned* some valueless animals which wandered into his camp.

had invaded the settlements—"and this being prohibited by our laws, I find myself obliged to notify you that on the receipt of this you must immediately retire beyond the limits of the department, such being the orders of the supreme government, which the undersigned is under the obligation of enforcing."

But, however much in the wrong, Frémont did not even explain himself—as courtesy required—by a written reply to the Prefect and military commander. Instead, he hastily prepared to give Castro battle. Doubtless he knew that if he yielded to the California demands, if he turned about and left the country without even a show of resistance, he would lose all prestige with his own men, and all credit with the American settlers in the region. Having provoked the challenge, he must meet it. He marched his men to a small wooded flat at the top of a neighboring eminence, Hawk's Peak in the Gabilan Mountains, where wood, water, and grass were all available. Here he could fight off a large force of assailants; he commanded a view of the surrounding Santa Clara Valley and Salinas plain; and if a retreat were necessary, he could easily escape to the San Joaquin on the east. While his party was building a rough but strong fort of logs, a tall sapling was cut and stripped, and when all was ready the American flag was raised to its top amid the cheers of the men.

For three days Frémont remained, holding his fort, his flag flying defiantly the while. He received messages from Larkin, the American consul, which gave him news of the Mexican movements,¹² and some settlers in the region also brought him word of what was going on. He wrote Larkin on March 9th that "I am very busy in making myself as strong as possible, and if attacked we will fight to extremity, and refuse quarter, trusting to our country to avenge our deaths. As yet no one has come to our camp from the Californians. But from our heights where we are encamped with a glass we can see troops collecting at St. John's and preparing cannon." With his glass, he perceived horsemen galloping and a body of two hundred

¹² Larkin Papers, Bancroft Library, No. 80.

men gathering at the San Juan Bautista Mission. Some vaqueros told him that Indians were being enticed into the camp and worked up to the fighting point with drink. The Americans awaited the event with a determination to die before surrendering. As evening approached on the second day, they espied a body of cavalry approaching, and Frémont, descending with forty men to a point where a thicket offered an excellent ambush, prepared to repel them. Happily the courage of the Mexicans failed, and when within a few hundred yards they stopped, consulted with each other, and turned back. Meanwhile, their commander had issued a proclamation:¹³

The citizen José Castro, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Mexican army and commander-in-chief of the Department of California:

Fellow Citizens: A band of robbers commanded by a captain of the United States army, J. C. Frémont, have, without respect to the laws and authorities of the department, daringly introduced themselves into the country and disobeyed the orders both of your commander-in-chief and of the prefect of the district, by which he was required to march forthwith out of the limits of our territory; and without answering our letters he remains encamped at the farm "Natividad," from which he sallies forth committing depredations, and making scandalous skirmishes.

In the name of our native country I invite you to place yourselves under my immediate orders at headquarters, where we will prepare to lance the ulcer which (would it not be done) would destroy our liberties and independence, for which you ought always to sacrifice yourselves, as will your friend and fellow citizen.

Headquarters at "San Juan."

8th March, 1846.

This proclamation was dated, it may be interjected, on the very day that Zachary Taylor's first troops crossed the Nueces into disputed territory, and so brought war within sight. Minister Slidell was about to be given his passports and return home; Archibald Gillespie was about to reach Honolulu on the last stage of his journey to California.

¹³ Fort Sutter Papers (Huntington Library), Vol. III.

Having shown the Mexican officials what he thought of their insulting conduct, having, as he supposed, maintained his own and the American dignity, Frémont decided to retire. Larkin was insistent that hostilities ought to be avoided, while other American residents were nervous regarding the consequences.¹⁴ Moreover, though Frémont had written Larkin that "we have in no wise done wrong to the people or the authorities of the country," he had come to realize that after all his conduct was rash; he might begin a war which Washington did not want, and if President Polk still hoped to obtain California peaceably, his belligerent acts might make such an acquisition impossible. Finally, Castro's force seemed to be growing uncomfortably large; he had three pieces of artillery, and Larkin sent word that an attack was about to begin. At this juncture, the pole bearing the flag fell down, and Frémont, as he wrote later, "took advantage of the accident to say to the men that this was an indication for us to move camp." But, setting off on the evening of March 9th, under cover of darkness, toward the San Joaquin at his rear, the Captain moved with defiant slowness. His men, and the American settlers in the area, thought that he retired with the honors of his encounter. Kit Carson, reflecting this view, writes in his autobiography that Castro had failed to frighten them by the thunders of his big guns: ¹⁵

We had in our party about forty men armed with rifles, Castro had several hundred soldiers of artillery, cavalry and infantry. Frémont received expresses from Monterey from Americans advising him to leave, that the Mexicans were strong and would surely attack us. He sent them word that he had done nothing to raise the wrath of the Mexican commander, that he was in performance of a duty, that let the consequences be what they may, execute a retreat he would not.

We remained in our position on the mountain for three days, had become tired of waiting for the attack of the valiant Mexican general. We then started for the Sacramento River.

¹⁴ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 462-464.

¹⁵ Quoted in Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, pp. 418, 419.

Turning north toward the Sacramento, Frémont for the better part of a week covered only four or six miles a day. Then he accelerated his pace, and leaving Sutter's Fort again on March 24th, passed rapidly up the Sacramento Valley and across the Oregon line.

He left behind him the Mexican officials breathing threats and boasts, although they seemed to have been impressed by Frémont's spirited conduct, and Castro is authentically reported to have said, "He has conducted himself as a worthy gentleman and an honorable officer." He left the American settlers in the Sacramento buzzing with excitement, and Consul Larkin writing feverish letters to Washington to explain the affair and to ask that a warship be sent up from Mazatlan. Rumors flew wildly about the country. Larkin wrote to Leidesdorff on March 21st:

We have had an excitement of late respecting the natives going to San Juan to drive away Capt. Frémont which deed they say they done, tho' I suppose he has gone to Santa Barbara as I presume he will go where he intends to go. They give him a hard name in their great Banda, a copy of which I have wrote to the General with the intention of answering it.

Up in the Napa Valley an American settler, James Clyman, heard the rumors. Men said, as he wrote March 17th, that Frémont had raised the American flag near Monterey, and that all loyal Californians had been summoned to rally with arms at Sonoma under General Vallejo to defend the rights of Mexican citizens. Unquestionably the affair had increased the suspicion and dislike that considerable bodies of Americans and native Californians felt for one another. Many of the rough Anglo-Saxons in the region thought any one of Mexican blood treacherous, shiftless, and dishonest; many Californians looked upon every American as potentially a lawless filibuster. Americans had heard a good deal of a supposed plan of Castro's to drive them out and keep them out, and some of them now looked to Frémont as a champion.

Castro, exultant at getting rid of his enemy, posted a flaring proclamation (the one referred to by Larkin) in which he informed the people that a band of freebooters—*bandoleros*—had come into the country to sack and slay, but that with two hundred courageous patriots he had driven the cowards off to the Tulares. Meanwhile, Captain William D. Phelps of an American merchant ship at Monterey, the *Moscow*, sent Frémont word that he would pick up the command at any point on the coast if it were hard-pressed. The before-mentioned James Clyman also wrote a note promising him the instant aid of a company of frontiersmen if he needed them. To this Frémont presently replied, somewhere on his northward march (the date is uncertain) that his position was perplexing; that the California authorities threatened “to overwhelm me”; that he thought “a declaration of war between our government and Mexico is probable,” but did not have authoritative news. If peace continued, he wrote, “I have no right or business here,” while if war began, “I shall be outnumbered ten to one,” and compelled to “retreat, pressed by a pursuing enemy.” In either event he did not want Clyman’s reinforcements.

The whole episode was in one light a bouffe affair. It had given an impetuous captain of the American Topographical Corps and a fiery, unstable lieutenant-colonel of the Mexican Army an opportunity to thumb their noses at each other. It had furnished a week of tense excitement for the native Californians and the English and American settlers. Nobody had been hurt, and neither side could take any pride in the affair. But in the main consequence above noted it was by no means to be taken lightly. Frémont and his men had succeeded in antagonizing many native Californians, who charged them with insolence, horse-thievery, and a desire for looting and guerrilla warfare.¹⁶ The restiveness of the Anglo-Saxon settlers had been greatly increased. Some of them had hastily gathered and sent off word to Frémont that they would ride to his rescue at once. Consul Larkin, writing to Secretary Buchanan, was explicit in

¹⁶ Fort Sutter Papers (Huntington Library), Vol. III.

saying that they were ready at any instant to join just such a standard of revolt as the explorer had raised. He also declared that Castro was not eager to try conclusions with Frémont. In fact, with all California behind him, Castro would not have dared to attack the explorer "even had he been sure of destroying the whole party, as five times their number could have taken their places before the expected battle. Captain Frémont received verbal applications from English and Americans to join his party, and could have mustered as many men as the natives."¹⁷

At Fort Sutter, the American settlers gathered around Frémont with loud expressions of approbation and encouragement. Many of them deplored his departure. The Captain must have taken north with him the knowledge that he could raise an army almost equal in numbers, and superior in tenacity and strength, to any the Mexicans in California would be likely to bring against him. It was a rather dangerous idea to implant in the mind of an impressionable, headstrong, and ambitious young man. As he left, Lieutenant Gillespie was upon the high seas between Hawaii and California with his instructions for Larkin and papers for Frémont; and Zachary Taylor had penetrated to within thirty miles of the Rio Grande despite a written warning from the Mexican forces that this advance would be deemed equivalent to a declaration of war.

¹⁷ Larkin despatches, State Department, April 2, 1846.

XVII

The Message from Gillespie

IT is difficult to determine just how seriously Frémont turned his mind toward exploration again after leaving Sutter's Fort for the North. His letters and memoirs would indicate that his old zest in the blazing of fresh wilderness trails had reawakened; and to some extent, it undoubtedly did. But in the main his eyes were still fixed upon California; his purpose to remain within easy marching distance of it was apparently unaltered, and it is significant that he made no energetic effort to reach the posts upon the Columbia. His movements before he was so dramatically recalled to the California stage may be briefly dismissed.

The close of March, 1846, found his expedition at the well-known ranch of Peter Lassen on Deer Creek, a tributary of the upper Sacramento, about two hundred miles from Sutter's Fort. Frémont formed a liking for Lassen, a Dane whose history was only less romantic than Sutter's, and who was a man of practical sense and courage. His wheat was yielding large returns, he was experimenting with cotton, and a vineyard had lately been set out. For almost a month, as if he were intent upon merely killing time, Frémont kept at or near the ranch. First his party rested and outfitted for six days; then they set off north up the Sacramento Valley, passing what Carson calls "Shasta Butte";¹ then, finding the weather stormy, they turned back south, reaching Lassen's Ranch again on April 11th; and here they delayed for almost two weeks more. Why this marching and counter-marching? Perhaps Fré-

¹ It was on April 6th, that Frémont first saw the snowy peak of Shasta on the northern horizon. At this time he was following almost the same route as Jedediah Smith in 1827-28. Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 313.

mont was waiting for two of his men, Godey and Martin, who had been left behind to bring up some horses from the Indian herds in the lower San Joaquin Valley; perhaps he was waiting for Theodore Talbot, left behind to bring some special supplies from San Francisco. But it seems more probable that he was delaying week after week for news of Mexican-American developments. He named a high peak of the coast range Mount Linn, after his friend the dead Senator; he made various geographical observations; and he wrote notes on plant life, especially that picturesque shrub the manzanita.

Finally, on April 24th, he actually took his departure. The day he left was, though he did not know it, an eventful one in American history, for it marked the first clash between Mexican and American troops on the Rio Grande. General Taylor reported this engagement with the ominous words: "Hostilities may now be considered as commenced." Pushing northward again, on May 6th Frémont reached Klamath Lake, and could, of course, easily have taken up his old trail to the Columbia River. But this did not suit his plans, and he decided instead to turn west and explore the almost untouched Cascade Range. He writes: ²

As I have said, except for the few trappers who had searched the streams leading to the ocean, I felt sure that these mountains were absolutely unknown. No one had penetrated their recesses to know what they contained, and no one had climbed to their summits; and there remained the great attraction of mystery in going into unknown places—the unknown lands of which I had dreamed when I began this life of frontier travel. And possibly, I thought, when I should descend their western flanks some safe harbor might yet be found by careful search along the coast, where harbors were so few; and perhaps good passages from the interior through these mountains to the sea. I thought that till the snow should go off the lower part of the mountains I might occupy what remained of the spring by a survey of the Klamath River to its heads, and make a good map of the country along the base of the mountains. And if

² *Memoirs*, I, p. 486.

we could not find game enough to live upon, we could employ the Indians to get supplies of salmon and other fish.

The scenery of the North, he adds, had taken hold upon his imagination:

I had not forgotten how fascinated I had been with the winter beauty of the snowy range farther north, when at sunrise and at sunset their rose-colored peaks stood up out of the dark pine forests into the clear light of the sky. And my thoughts took the same color when I remembered that Mr. Kern, who had his colors with him, could hold these lovely views in all their delicate coloring.

But we may doubt if Frémont really had any earnest desire to traverse the Cascade Range, and it is certain that he was soon ready to turn back. Snow was falling heavily and continuously in the mountains which rose across his path. The ground was discouragingly difficult. Fallen timber, the debris washed down by rain and melting snow, and the rocky ridges made a march of a few miles exhausting. Their way led between Klamath Lake and the foot of the Cascades; and after rising early, plunging all day through the marshy coves and toiling over the rocky spurs of the hills, they would sometimes find at nightfall that they had hardly advanced at all. Their provisions were almost exhausted; their horses were enfeebled, for the early season offered little forage. They saw nothing of the Indians except now and then a canoe glancing rapidly across the gloomy waters, but they knew that hostile forces were not far distant. Although Frémont records in his narrative for May 6th that "Animals and men all fared well here [on Klamath Lake]," and was certain next day that he could obtain enough lake fish if game grew scarce, there is evidence that he found his force uneasy and depressed, and that he himself began to feel serious misgivings. At this moment, on the evening of May 8th, a voice came out of the dark forest behind him, and he was recalled to that ambitious dream of Californian conquest which, beyond doubt, had seized upon his imagination long months before.

The voice was that of the farmer and blacksmith Samuel Neal, who had a ranch on Butte Creek, another branch of the Sacramento, well to the south of Lassen's.³ While Frémont sat beside his camp-fire, he heard a trample of hoofs in the silent woods; the noise grew steadily louder; and then Neal suddenly shouted from the gloom toward the camp, and rode into the firelight with a companion. As the men stiffly dismounted, it was plain that they and their horses were almost spent. They had ridden nearly a hundred miles in the two preceding days. Why? From their first sentences, Frémont gathered that a United States officer was on his trail with despatches from Washington. When the men had refreshed themselves with coffee at the fire, they told a fuller story. The officer was Lieutenant A. H. Gillespie of the Marine Corps, who had letters for Frémont. He had come up the Sacramento in a small boat, made inquiries at Sutter's Fort, and hurried on. Reaching Neal's ranch in the upper Sacramento Valley, he had been warned that hostile Indians were about, and that it would be dangerous for an inexperienced man with tired horses to follow Frémont. He had therefore despatched Neal and one of his employees to overtake the expedition and bring it back. These two couriers had ridden ahead, at one point charging pistol in hand through a party of hostile savages.

As always, Frémont acted without hesitation. They must make up a party to set off at daybreak, he decided; and he chose ten men, including Carson, Godey, Dick Owens, Maxwell, and Basil Lajeunesse, to accompany him. Doubtless a thrill of excitement ran through the whole camp; doubtless conjecture rose high upon the possibility that war had begun and that their little force was needed for immediate action in California. At dawn the party was ready to march; and having covered thirty or forty miles of rough ground by a herculean

³ Neal had been with Frémont on his earlier expedition into California, and had remained behind at Sutter's Fort; since then he had stocked a prosperous ranch on the Feather River, which Frémont had visited on his way up to Lassen's.

effort,⁴ at sunset they met Gillespie and his three companions in a glade which formed a natural camp-site near the southern end of Klamath Lake. That meeting, with its physical background of wild forest and water in the virgin Northwest, its political background of territorial ambition and war, was one of the most dramatic in the history of the Pacific Coast.

It was not only one of the most dramatic, but in its implications one of the most mysterious; for here we are confronted by the most baffling problem of Frémont's career. What were the instructions brought by Gillespie which caused Frémont to cut short his explorations, turn south, invade California, and help begin in earnest the war which he had threatened a few weeks earlier? He knew that mere re-entrance upon California soil, from which he had been expelled with a warning to keep off, would be construed as a hostile act. Did he have genuine warrant for his course? Or did he, with characteristic precipitancy, base a bold and stubborn policy upon inadequate authority?

Gillespie, an energetic, ambitious, egotistical, and rather excitable young officer, who had left Washington early in November, 1845, had reached Monterey on April 17, 1846, by way of Vera Cruz, Mexico City, Mazatlan, and Honolulu. He brought Frémont a copy of an official despatch from Secretary of State Buchanan, some American newspapers, family missives from Benton and Jessie, and some verbal explanations, as well as much news picked up en route. Whether he brought secret instructions remains a burning question, for even the belated publication of his reports to the Secretary of the Navy, furnishing phrases which may be construed to support both views of the matter, has not settled the issue. The family letters of course had no official weight. Frémont knew how powerful was the Senator's influence with the Administration; he knew that

⁴ Dellenbaugh says forty-five miles; *Frémont and '49*, p. 317. In this he follows Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, p. 488. Sabin says thirty miles; *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 427. Gillespie in his letter to the Navy Department says fifty!

Benton would stand by him loyally in any reasonable action. But as an army officer Frémont also knew that nothing the Senator wrote could be used as warrant for any military step, and that to launch his force upon a warlike course he required some direct official authority—unless he took the risk of disavowal and punishment. Apparently the only really official document brought by Gillespie was Buchanan's despatch. What policy did it suggest?

The answer appears simple. The despatch dated October 17th, was directed not to Frémont but to the consul, Larkin, though Gillespie had been ordered to take a copy to Frémont. It contained nothing that the explorer could construe as a suggestion for the use of armed force against the Californians.⁵ Instead, it instructed Larkin to carry on a peaceful intrigue for the secession of California from Mexico by the voluntary act of its inhabitants. He was requested to be discreet, cautious, and sleepless. He was to approach the California authorities, assure them of American goodwill in their disputes with Mexico, and encourage them to break loose with a promise of our "kind offices as a sister republic." Once they became such a separate nation as Texas had been, they might look forward to annexation. "If the people should desire to unite their destiny with ours," wrote Buchanan, "they would be received as brethren." One other injunction was laid upon Larkin with special emphasis; he was told that Washington had reason to fear British or French aggression in California. He must counteract these foreign machinations by friendly appeals: "On all proper occasions you should not fail prudently to warn the government and people of California of the danger of such an interference to their peace and happiness; to inspire them with a jealousy of European dominion; and to arouse in their bosoms that love of liberty and independence so natural to the American continent." Obviously, in all this Frémont not only

⁵ The text is published in the *Century Magazine*, April, 1891; compare Ernest A. Wiltsee, *The Truth About Frémont: An Enquiry*, p. 97. Gillespie before reaching Vera Cruz had committed the instructions to memory and destroyed the written copy.

found no authority for hostile action against the Californians, but was given a direct warning against it.

The desire of the Polk Administration to conciliate the Californians might be attested by many other facts and documents. A despatch from Secretary Bancroft was sent to Commodore Sloat, commander of the Pacific squadron at Mazatlan, under almost the same date as Buchanan's despatch to Larkin, October 14, 1845. Sloat was ordered to keep in constant touch with Larkin, and to ascertain the attitude of the Californians toward the United States and Mexico City. "You will do everything," he was directed, "that is proper to conciliate towards our country the most friendly regard of the people of California." If hostilities with Mexico did not occur, he was to detach part of his squadron to display the American flag in the Columbia River. This despatch, like that to Larkin, breathed friendliness to the Californians, and a hope for peace.⁶

So much for the official documents; but there remain the private letters and Gillespie's verbal information, upon which Frémont, as he stated later, unquestionably based his actions. Gillespie brought exciting news. He told Frémont that Sloat had heard of his encounter with Castro through the brig *Hannah*, and to protect the Americans had promptly sent the *Portsmouth* to San Francisco. Since Gillespie had left Mazatlan February 22nd, when he had news from Mexico City of about February 10th, he could tell Frémont that Mexico and the United States had then stood on the very brink of war. Actually Taylor on March 28 reached the Rio Grande, where fighting was expected at any time. He doubtless also had much to say about the revolution in Mexico City which had ousted Herrera and elevated Paredes, head of the war party, to leadership; for Gillespie, who spoke Spanish well, had seen the excitement accompanying this overturn. He could tell Frémont of the proclamation issued at Monterey on April 17th that unnaturalized foreigners in California could not hold land and were subject to expulsion.

⁶ Compare H. H. Bancroft, *History of California*, V, pp. 85-90.

Finally, he may have shown Frémont a letter which Larkin had written him on April 23rd and sent to San Francisco, just as he was starting north to find the explorer; and if he did not show the letter, he probably conveyed its contents.⁷ It contained news that at last reports the Mexican authorities at Mazatlan had expected Sloat to blockade the port, and had fled to Rosario with the archives. It also declared that Captain Montgomery had expressed the opinion "that Commodore Sloat may by the next mail (6 or 8 days) have a declaration on the part of the United States against Mexico, in which case we shall see him in a few days to take the country." Consul Larkin added that the Californians were much disturbed by the *Portsmouth's* arrival:

I have (as my opinion) said to Generals Castro, Carrillo, and Vallejo, that our flag may fly here in thirty days. The first says, for his own plans, war is preferable to peace, as by war affairs will at once be brought to a close, and each one will know his doom.... I have had many of the leaders at my house to inquire into the news, and believe they are fast preparing themselves for the coming events.

As a matter of history, on the very days that Neal and Gillespie reached Frémont, May 8 and 9, 1846, the first sharp battles of the Mexican War occurred. The sun that went down upon Gillespie and the Captain shaking hands in that Klamath glade sank also upon the bloody and smoking field of Resaca de la Palma. Frémont might well have felt almost certain that fighting was already under way. In the light of Gillespie's news of the imminence of war, in the light of what Frémont knew of the stormy situation in California, the peaceful injunctions in the despatch to Larkin might well have struck him as unreal and out of date. They would probably so have impressed even a cautious and conservative officer, and Frémont

⁷ It is not certain that the letter reached Gillespie before he left San Francisco, but it does seem fairly certain that at least the same information reached Leidesdorff in time for the latter to give it to Gillespie; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 436.

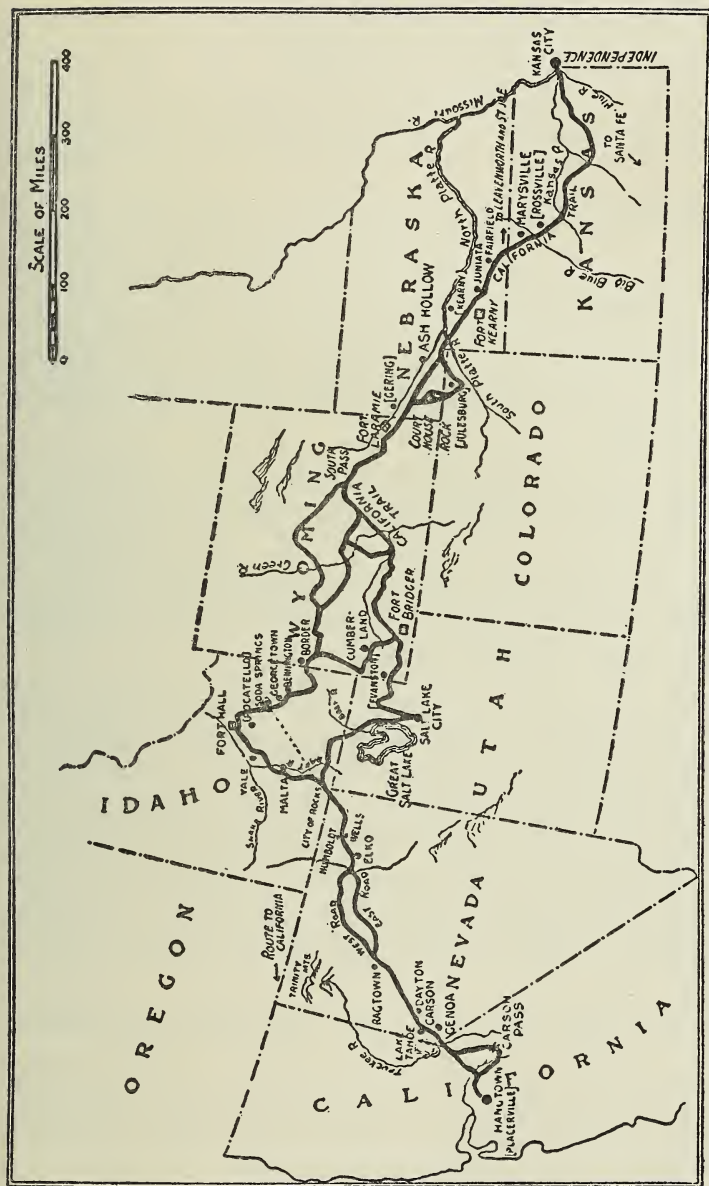
was never cautious. In his *Memoirs* he frankly states that he believed the instructions inadequate. "This idea [of annexation by conciliation] was no longer practicable as actual war was inevitable and immediate," he writes, "moreover, it was in conflict with our own instructions. We dropped this idea from our minds, but falling on others less informed [i.e., Sloat], it came near losing us California." He adds that "the rapid progress of affairs had already rendered" conciliation impossible, and made it necessary to "carry out the ultimate purpose of the government."

That Gillespie was full of his impression that hostilities on the Rio Grande might be announced at any moment, may be gathered from a letter which vice-consul Leidesdorff wrote Larkin from San Francisco on April 25th, just after seeing Gillespie. He was sure that Frémont would be jubilant over what the messenger told him: ⁸

According to your request, I have done everything in my power for Mr. Archibald H. Gillespie, he leaves this place in a few hours for the Sacramento, as I do not know exactly what funds he will require previous to his leaving this, I cannot inform you by this opportunity however in my next I shall forward you my private account; Glorious news for Capt. Frémont. I think I see him smile. by your letter it appears that this news was not generally known. however here they must have some as the Sub Prefecto was busy dispatching couriers in the different part of the country. and Capt. Hinckley had been heard to say, that Guierera [Guerro] had received a courier yesterday, advising him of the expected war with Mexico. how he got his news I cannot say. If Mr. Swasey has no employ yet, send him to me for I am all alone, and have a great deal to do....

Altogether, there was much in both the circumstances of Larkin's errand and the news he bore to impress Frémont—quite willing to be impressed—with a belief that he ought to turn back to California. Here was an officer who had come all the way from Washington with letters and intelligence for him;

⁸ Wiltsee, *The Truth About Frémont: An Enquiry*, pp. 9, 10.



THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL

(FROM ARCHER BUTLER HULBERT, *Fortyniners*; BY COURTESY OF LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY.)

who had been forwarded to him with eager haste and at great expense, by the American consul and vice-consul; who brought word that war with Mexico was imminent. He brought word also that the Oregon question was still unsettled, Polk having rejected the latest British proposals—that the tension between the two nations on that issue was still great. Doubtless Gillespie saw that his “glorious news” lost nothing in the telling.⁹

But Gillespie also bore family letters, and verbal instructions from Secretary Bancroft. Upon these family letters we have explicit statements from both Frémont and Jessie, who agree that they warned Frémont to be ready to take a militant stand. Mrs. Frémont asserts that they might be said to be in a family cipher, and Frémont declares this more emphatically. Benton’s letter, he writes,

while apparently of friendship and family detail, contained passages and suggestions which, read by the light of many conversations and discussions with himself and others at Washington, clearly indicated to me that I was required by the government to find out any foreign schemes in relation to California, and so far as it might be in my power, to counteract them.

Conversing long afterward with Josiah Royce, Frémont said that the letters were particularly clear upon the desirability “of taking and holding possession of California in the event of any occurrence that would justify it, leaving it to my discretion to decide upon such an occurrence.” He was warned of the British designs and told that Polk desired that he “should not let the English get possession of California, but should use any means in his power, or any occasion that offered, to prevent such a thing.”¹⁰

Frémont’s recollection of the affair might well be regarded as

⁹ Larkin wrote Leidesdorff that “Mr. Packingham has the second or third time made Oregon propositions to Mr. Buchanan,” that “Mr. Polk will have none of it,” and that Polk “is for our own territory . . . without arbitration.” This information, relayed to Frémont, might well have increased his fears of a British stroke on the coast. Wiltsee, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 13.

¹⁰ Jessie Benton Frémont, *Century Magazine*, Vol. XIX, New Series, p. 922; Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 489; Royce, *California*, p. 116.

confused, or colored by a desire for self-justification; but it is measurably corroborated by a letter, inaccurate in a few particulars but nevertheless illuminating, which Secretary Bancroft wrote him in old age, when Royce's book had made the subject controversial. Bancroft speaks of verbal instructions: ¹¹

You as an officer of the army were made thoroughly acquainted with the state of things in California.

My motive in sending so promptly the order to take possession was not from any fear that England would resist, but from the apprehension that an English man of war in San Francisco harbor would have a certain degree of inconvenience, and that it was much better for us to be masters there before the ship should arrive; and my orders reached there very long before any English vessel was off California. The shameful delay of Sloat made a danger, but still he took possession of San Francisco before a British ship arrived.

Not having my papers here, all I can say is, that after your interview with Gillespie, you were absolved from any orders as an explorer, and became an officer of the American army, warned by your government of your new danger against which you became bound to defend yourself; and it was made known to you, on the authority of the Secretary of the Navy, that a great object of the President was to obtain possession of California. If I had been in your place, I should have considered myself bound to do what I could to promote the purpose of the President. You were alone, no Secretary of War to appeal to, he was thousands of miles off; and yet it was officially made known to you that your country was at war; ¹² and it was so made known expressly to guide your conduct. It was further made known to you, that the acquisition of California was become a chief object of the President. If you had letters to that effect from the Secretary of War, you had your warrant. If you were left without orders from the War Department, certainly you learned through the Secretary of the Navy that the President's plan of war included the taking possession of California.

¹¹ Original letter in Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library, dated Newport, Rhode Island, September 3, 1886.

¹² This was of course not true.

The truth is, that no officer of the government had anything to do with California but the Secretary of the Navy, so long as I was in the Cabinet. It had been my desire to acquire California by all honorable means much before that time.

As to the President, if you see fit to state what I have stated to you, that President Polk entered on his office with a fixed determination to acquire California, if he could acquire it in an honorable and just manner; if you see fit to make that statement, and anyone disputes it, I give you full leave to cite me as your authority. I held and the President held, that it was impossible for Mexico, situated as things then were, to have retained possession of California; and therefore it was right to negotiate with Mexico for the acquisition of California by ourselves as the decisive point in the perfect establishment of the Union on a foundation that cannot be moved. Up to that time the division was between North and South. From that moment all division, if there was to be one, was between the North, Centre, and West against the South.

Bancroft's memorandum, enclosed with this letter, declares:

Very soon after March 4, 1845, Mr. Polk, one day when I was alone with him, in the clearest manner and with the utmost energy declared to me what were to be the four great measures of his administration. He succeeded in all the four, and one of the four was the acquisition of California for the United States. This it was hoped to accomplish by peaceful negotiation; but if Mexico, in resenting our acceptance of the offer of Texas to join us, should begin a war with us, then by taking possession of the province. As we had a squadron in the North Pacific, but no army, the measures for carrying out this design fell to the Navy Department. The Secretary of the Navy, who had good means of gaining news as to the intentions of Mexico, and had reason to believe that its government intended to make war on us, directed timely preparation for it. In less than four months after the inauguration, on the 24th day of June, 1845, he sent orders to the commanding officer of the United States naval forces on the Pacific that "if he should ascertain that Mexico had declared war against the United States, he should at once possess himself of the port of San Francisco and such other ports as his forces might permit." At the same time he was instructed to en-

courage the inhabitants of California "to adopt a course of neutrality." The Secretary of the Navy repeated these orders in August and in October, 1845, and in February, 1846. On one of these occasions he sent the orders by the hands of an accomplished and thoroughly trustworthy officer of the navy as a messenger, well instructed in the designs of the Department and with the purposes of the administration, so far as they related to California. Captain Frémont having been sent originally on a peaceful mission to the west by way of the Rocky Mountains, it had become necessary to give him warning of the new state of affairs and the designs of the President. The officer who had charge of the dispatches from the Secretary of the Navy to Commodore Sloat, and who had purposely been made acquainted with their import, accordingly made his way to Captain Frémont, who thus became acquainted with the state of affairs and the purposes of the government. Being absolved from any duty as an explorer, Captain Frémont was left to his duty as an officer in the service of the United States, with the further authoritative knowledge that the government intended to take possession of California.

Bancroft adds in this memorandum that while the United States had no reason to fear a conflict in California with any European nation, some Power might take a position which would be "inconvenient" and that the Administration wished for "due celerity" in the movement of its forces. As we have said, Great Britain actually had no designs upon California. But this the Polk Administration did not know; it believed the opposite. Bancroft was aware that the British squadron at Mazatlan was much stronger than the American, and that a state of tension existed between the two. The British Government had shown a wavering attitude toward American annexation; while sometimes it seemed acquiescent, early in 1845 it had informed its vice-consul at Monterey that it "would view with much dissatisfaction the establishment of a protectoral power over California by any other foreign state." Uneasiness in Washington was by no means incomprehensible. Moreover, we know now that Gillespie had been much impressed by news that the British sloop *Modeste* had been lingering in the Co-

lumbia River. He wrote the Secretary of the Navy just before he reached Monterey: "The settlers shew much feeling upon her entrance, and most heartily wished that they could seize their rifles and rake her decks as she passed. They look with great anxiety and hope for the arrival of an Agent of our government, if not to take immediate jurisdiction, at least to have an eye upon the movements of British agents."¹³

Altogether, Frémont might be excused for feeling more disturbed than ever after receiving Gillespie's messages. The instructions to Larkin, as repeated to him, enjoined a peaceful policy toward the Californians, an effort to foster an independent California republic. But what was California? Divided between a northern government and a southern government; between men loyal to Mexico and men disloyal; between native Californians and Anglo-American settlers—no republic could be set up without initial turmoil. The instructions seemed to contemplate another Texas, but the independence of Texas had been achieved by American residents, not by its Mexican population, and after much hard fighting. Could California's independence be achieved otherwise? Buchanan knew little of affairs on the coast; moreover, instructions written in the fall of 1845, with war still distant, hardly fitted the spring of 1846, with war about to break. And then Benton, who opposed war with Mexico, was fearful of British intervention on the coast. Any officer in Frémont's shoes would have hesitated. With the knowledge that war was almost certainly at hand, that fighting could hardly be avoided in California, that a large British naval force was not far distant, which was he to do: push on homeward by the Oregon Trail with his well-armed men, a force obviously equipped with an eye to possible military service, or turn back toward California?

¹³ President Polk himself may have given Gillespie verbal warnings of importance. He writes: "I held a confidential conversation with Lieut. Gillespie of the Marine Corps, about 8 o'clock p.m., on the subject of the secret mission on which he was to go to California. His secret instructions and the letter to Mr. Larkin . . . will explain the object of his mission." *Diary*, October 30, 1845. Gillespie's remarks on the British warship *Modeste* may be found in George Walcott Ames, Jr., *op. cit.*, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVII, p. 135.

Theoretically, he should have held himself strictly bound by the official instructions to Larkin; he should have known that the government would not permit an army officer to do what it had forbidden its consul. Its orders forbade open interference with California affairs unless Mexico "should commence hostilities against the United States." But Frémont, still only thirty-four, believed in action and disbelieved in binding orders. At his back stood a group of rugged frontiersmen, Carson, Owens, and others, who believed still more strongly in daring initiative. It was impossible to stand still; beyond doubt it seemed to him a spiritless and craven act to turn his back on California. Perhaps his later career would have been happier had he regarded himself purely as an explorer, and moved east to report in Washington. But after all, he had never been purely an explorer; he had been partly an agent of that militant expansionist Senator Benton, of the other Westerners in Congress, and of Secretary Bancroft. If he were purely an explorer, why did he have sixty armed men at his back? And what would be said of him when he arrived tamely in St. Louis, his sixty men having gained nothing but a pocketful of data on deserts and mountains, while the press resounded with reports of battle and conquest in the Southwest?

We can easily imagine the thoughts that passed through his mind that May night in the forest opening of southwestern Oregon, beside the creek rippling toward the lake. He paced back and forth by the fire, interrogating Gillespie. In his excitement he failed, for the second time in his life in Indian country (the men being exhausted by their thirty- or forty-mile march) to post sentries.¹⁴ Long after his party had wrapped themselves in their blankets he remained by the fire, going over the home letters. Every line in them, he wrote years later, seemed to say: "*The time has come. England must not get a foothold. We must be first. Act: discreetly but positively.*" If

¹⁴ Gillespie, writes Frémont, had told him that there were no Indians on his trail. The other night when he failed to post a guard was the night spent on the island in the midst of Great Salt Lake. *Memoirs*, I, p. 490.

war came, abrogating the instructions to Larkin, an opportunity lay before him to help realize in their fullest extent all the dreams of Senator Benton, all the plans which the Western group in Congress had based upon the principle of manifest destiny. The Pacific would at once be made the western boundary of the republic, and he would bear a hand in performing the feat. But he must be in a position to act before the Mexican Government could organize its defense in California, or a British captain interfere at Monterey. Full of these thoughts, he crept to his bed under some low cedars growing along the margin of the woods, their boughs almost touching the ground, and drowsed off.

The story of the remainder of that tragic night, the one night on which Frémont permitted a surprise, has been retold by Western historians a hundred times. Only seventeen or eighteen men (Carson mistakenly says fourteen) lay about the dying fire. Toward dawn, Carson was awakened by the noise of an Indian driving his ax through the head of one of the sleepers, Basil Lajeunesse. He called out in alarm, and heard the groan of another man killed in the same way. The camp instantly roused itself as the Klamaths charged into it. As they leaped into the open, one of the Delawares fought them with a clubbed gun until he was riddled with arrows; Frémont, Carson, Godey, and two other white men rushed to the rescue, shouting and firing point-blank. The Klamath chief fell and his followers, disheartened, dodged back into the woods. Then ensued a desultory warfare in the dark, the white men replying with lead to every volley of arrows.

When at dawn the savages slunk away, the light revealed a tragic scene. Lajeunesse, the Delaware named Crane, and the half-breed lay dead in their blood, while another Delaware was wounded. On the ground also lay the Klamath chief, and Carson vengefully seized an English half-ax which hung at the Indian's waist and knocked his head to pieces. His quiver contained forty of the finest and most deadly arrows the party had ever seen, tipped with steel heads of lancet sharpness,

obtained probably from the Hudson's Bay Company, and poisoned for six inches. The disaster sealed Frémont's determination to turn south, for his party was too much shaken and demoralized to push on into the wild Cascade Range.

Angered by their loss, the survivors, after reuniting the next day with the main party, determined that before they left they would wreak vengeance upon the treacherous Indians. They made a complete circuit of Klamath Lake, Carson being sent ahead to find a village for attack. He set upon the largest one within reach, and while Frémont galloped up with reinforcements, completely routed the braves and slew fourteen men. Then they fired the rush huts and the scaffolds upon which the Indians were drying their annual supply of fish; the flames "a beautiful sight," writes Carson. This retaliatory expedition offered few dangers for frontiersmen armed with the best rifles of the day, and facing only bows and arrows, though at one point an ambushing Indian would assuredly have killed Carson had not Frémont bravely ridden him down with his steed Sacramento. The raid gave Frémont profound satisfaction. "I had kept the promise I had made to myself, and had punished these people well for their treachery," he writes, "and now I turned my thoughts to the work they had delayed."

On May 24th, the expedition arrived again at Lassen's Ranch on the upper waters of the Sacramento, well within the borders of California. Here, as Gillespie wrote the Secretary of the Navy, they met the alarming report that Don José Castro, by a proclamation of April 17th, had ordered all non-citizens to be ready to leave the province, and that he was determined to prevent the entrance of the new American immigrants expected during the summer. The party received this intelligence with anger. Frémont increasingly felt that he could no longer regard himself as head merely of an exploring expedition; that he was rather the leader of a body of armed Americans who must observe the situation, protect American settlers, and stand ready to strike in the event of war. His position on Mexican soil was more than anomalous; strictly speaking, it was lawless.

Yet to abandon the settlers, leave a coast on which British warships were stationed, and march meekly homeward—would not that be cowardice and folly? To protect himself and to cast a thin mantle of legality about his acts, he still posed as an explorer, who intended in good time to push back to St. Louis by a southern route; but he and his men stood ready for more decisive action.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sabin bids us remember the influence of Frémont's men on his course, and especially in the light of the rankling insult which they all believed that Castro had given them. Such hardy adventurers as Kern, Talbot, Kit Carson, Maxwell, Owens, and Alexis Godey resented the acts of the insolent don; they would have voted heartily in favor of waiting near or in California to learn if war had not begun, and for taking an energetic hand in hostilities. *Kit Carson Days*, I, p. 442. A clear indication that Gillespie also urged him is found in Gillespie's statement to the Navy Department under date of July 8, 1848: ". . . But for my perilous journey into the mountains of Oregon, in pursuit of Col. Frémont to perform faithfully the duty entrusted to me by the Government, the early movements which frustrated British intrigue in California could not have been made." *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVII, No. 4.

XVIII

The Bear Flag Outbreak

MEANWHILE, storm clouds were rapidly gathering over all the fair province of California.

While Frémont's party had been moving north from Sutter's Fort to Peter Lassen's and there marking time as its leader waited for news, Castro had been taking steps for the defense of the northern areas. Late in March he brought a junta of military men together at Monterey to discuss the situation and advise him as to the best policy. This body immediately recognized Paredes as the new President *ad interim* of the Mexican nation. It then on April 11th reached a series of decisions which had the effect of taking all practical power out of the hands of Governor Pio Pico at Los Angeles, and placing it in that of Don José Castro. These decisions were that the northern towns must be fortified and defended; that Castro's presence in charge of this work was indispensable; that Pico should be invited to Monterey to take part in the defensive activities, but that if he declined Castro should assume full powers with headquarters at Santa Clara; and that he should exercise these powers until the assistance promised by Mexico arrived. Pio Pico violently protested against all this, and the upshot was an embittered division between the two chiefs. When Pico appealed to General Vallejo at Sonoma for support, the latter took Castro's side. He declared that the danger of foreign invasion from the north was real and urgent, that immediate defensive steps were imperative, and that in an emergency Castro could not possibly consult a governor two hundred leagues away.¹

¹ Hittell, *History of California*, II, p. 395ff.

But Pio Pico stood his ground, and took every measure within his power to oppose Castro. He deemed the acts of the Monterey junta illegal and treasonable, and equivalent to a virtual declaration of war by the north against the south. That danger of a foreign invasion existed he refused to believe. Castro's real intention, he suspected, was to raise troops on the pretext that Frémont was approaching, and then use them to overthrow the Los Angeles government. He and his friends resolved to fight fire with fire. They would recruit a military force ostensibly to resist American invasion, march north with it in response to Castro's invitation, and then fall upon that officer and remove him from command. They also summoned a general council to meet at Santa Barbara on June 15th, with delegates from both north and south, to determine upon measures "to avoid the fatal events impending at home and abroad." The real purposes of this council (which never sat) were a mystery. But many believed that an effort would be made to declare the independence of California from Mexico, while it was suspected that some leaders would go so far as to urge an English or French protectorate. This suspicion, as H. H. Bancroft tells us, was not without foundation; indeed, we now know that before the end of June, Governor Pio Pico formally applied to the British vice-consul in California for the protection of British naval forces "to stop the progress of the ambitions of the Americans."²

Thus as Frémont turned back toward San Francisco Bay, civil war was threatening between the northern and southern parts of the province, a movement for independence was developing fast, and certain groups were urging a European protectorate. Castro during May and June was ranging the northern country from Monterey to Sonoma to raise troops to meet invasion, and his efforts were creating the greatest alarm among the weak and undefended American settlers. Every one

² Bancroft, *History of California*, V, p. 47. For Pio Pico's application see Ernest A. Wiltsee, "The British Vice-Consul in California and the events of 1846," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, X (1931), p. 99ff.

knew that the Mexican Government could not protect California, that a revolution in its status was now certain, and that it would result either in a republic or in annexation to some foreign power. Every one who was aware of the intrigues in Monterey and Los Angeles feared that civil strife would accompany these changes. It was a gloomy, confused land toward which Frémont moved. As he threaded the thinly-wooded valley to the Buttes of the lower Sacramento, a position some sixty miles north of Sutter's Fort, well fitted to command the river and to threaten Sonoma, and as he and Gillespie talked with the first settlers they met, his purposes rapidly clarified. First, he was almost certain from his talks with Gillespie that the next few weeks would bring decisive news of war; second, whether he had secret instructions through Gillespie to do so or not, he felt it his duty to wait near the scene of war; third, he believed that in the meantime he must place himself where he could extend moral protection to the American settlers; and fourth, when and if war began he was resolved to play an active part in it. All this seems clear from his actions.

It is not difficult to follow the development of his purposes. On May 25th, the day after arriving at Lassen's Ranch, he sent post-haste to Captain Montgomery of the *Portsmouth* in San Francisco Bay for 8,000 percussion caps, 300 pounds of rifle-lead, and a keg of powder, as well as food, medicine, soap, and tobacco. His command, he wrote, was "at present almost destitute," and it was true that the northern march had stripped it of supplies; but he was thinking of more than provisions—he was plainly thinking of possible fighting. At Lassen's Ranch he also paused to write Benton a letter which, since it had to go home by sea from a California port and might be opened, was in most respects studiously non-committal. Much of it was devoted to affairs in Oregon. He called attention to the fact that the British had a fur-trading post on the Umpqua River, directly west of Klamath Lake, in the heart of the Klamath tribe. They had planted it, he believed, as an outpost in the event of war with the United States, so that Indians might be

recruited there and supplied with firearms. These Indians were brave men, deadly shots, and much attached to the British. "If there is to be a war with England," urged Frémont, "it is of great importance that they [the English] should instantly be driven from this and similar posts. . . . These things may be worthy of Mr. Buchanan's attention." After expressing regret that he had heard nothing directly from Buchanan, he added: "I shall now proceed directly homewards, by the Colorado, but cannot arrive at the frontier until late in September." Gillespie sent a note by the same courier to Consul Larkin, describing his experiences, and making an excuse for Frémont's return southward: "There was too much snow upon the mountains to cross. He now goes home from here."³ Actually, with summer at hand, the snow upon the mountains was a very thin pretext.

Frémont's real intentions became evident—and were confirmed—as soon as he arrived on May 30th among the American settlers who were scattered about and below the Buttes. He halted briefly here to rearm his party, collect provisions, and observe the situation. Kit Carson writes significantly in his autobiography that "camp was made to await positive orders in regard to the war, to hunt." Positive orders in regard to the war!—for Frémont now regarded his party rather as a military force than as an exploring expedition. As he states in his *Memoirs*: "I clearly saw that my proper course was to observe quietly the progress of affairs, and take advantage of any contingency which I could turn in favor of the United States, and, where uncertainties arose, to give my country the benefit of my doubts by taking decided action." As the correspondence of Captain Montgomery indicates, he canvassed plans for perhaps going as far southward as the Santa Barbara area, Pio Pico's seat, and having the *Portsmouth* proceed to that town.⁴

³ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 449, 500, 504, 505. Frémont's letter was dated May 24, 1846; he stated that he would probably reach Benton before the letter, subject to long sea delays, could do so.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 508. Ernest A. Wiltsee, *ut supra*, gives Montgomery's letters with shrewd comment. On June 10th, Montgomery wrote Frémont that if, as a message brought by Gillespie indicated, he wished the *Portsmouth* to meet him at

For he was powerfully moved by what he heard from the settlers. His sudden reappearance within forbidden bounds naturally created a commotion among the American residents, many of whom rode forthwith into Frémont's camp. During 1845 a large number of new emigrants had arrived, so that the province now counted fully eight hundred Americans, nearly all able-bodied men. Some were legal landowners, but the greater number had simply squatted on the land, or picked up a living by a combination of work as ranch-hands with hunting and trapping. In general, they were a heterogeneous lot, alike only in being rugged and hard-hitting. The majority were farmers and ranchers of sterling character, good material for a new state. Mingled with them, however, were reckless sailors, ignorant and drifting backwoodsmen, and buckskin-clad trappers of erratic ways. With the Anglo-Saxon's instinctive feeling of superiority to other races, most of them looked condescendingly upon the gay, inefficient Californians, who loved gambling, guitars, and fandangos, and made so little use of the beautiful country. They felt that California ought to be in the hands of their own virile, energetic race, and that it was only a question of time and opportunity until they should take over its control. Some malcontents and adventurers who longed for a conflict with Mexico now saw opportunity in the crisis. But the peaceable majority were genuinely frightened by the drift of affairs.

These settlers brought Frémont a wild variety of rumors—that war between the United States and Mexico was about to begin; that Castro and others were plotting to separate California from Mexico, but were unwilling to place it under American protection; that the British were scheming to annex California forthwith. Most of them agreed upon one circumstantial report—that Castro and his merciless crew were planning to raise the Indians and fall upon all foreign settlers to scatter

Santa Barbara, the ship would be there. Why should a naval captain obey the hinted command of a Captain of the topographical corps if he did not have reason to believe that Washington desired close coöperation?

them to the winds. "On our road down the valley," wrote Gillespie to the Navy Department,⁵

we found that General Castro was fast hurrying the crisis, which time would soon have brought about. The Indians of the valley, formerly so peaceful, had become hostile and had deserted their *rancherias* or wigwams for the mountains, and killed some servants of the settlers, and had threatened the lives of many whites. Arriving within sixty miles of New Helvetia (Sutter's), we were informed that the Indians threatened to burn the wheat then advancing towards the harvest.... The Department can readily imagine the state of feeling among the people. It would have given pain to the hardest heart, to have witnessed the applications of the hardy settler and his wife, when begging aid and protection of Captain Frémont on his road down the valley; who, true to his position and the strict neutrality required by the delicate situation which he occupied under the existing state of affairs, could only give them advice, and begged them to wait a positive demonstration on the part of General Castro.

Samuel Hensley and Neal, with whom Frémont talked at length, agreed that American residents would either have to leave the country, or fight for the homes they had made.⁶ The

⁵ Ames, "Gillespie and the Conquest of California," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVII (1938), p. 271ff.

⁶ In corroboration, see the William Hargrave MS, Bancroft Library. Hargrave, a Napa Valley settler, declared in 1878: "Disputes about land and personal property were the first causes of bad feeling, but the appearance of Frémont west of the Rocky Mountains and the dispatch of United States vessels of war to the Pacific Coast made the 'foreigners' bolder and the Californians suspicious. In 1845 the Mexican authorities at Monterey sent an officer of the government over all the settlements north of San Francisco Bay to count the foreigners able to bear arms, evidently for the purpose of making an estimate of the number of men to overcome in the event of hostilities. We all knew perfectly well the object of his mission. At the same time the Spaniards became very threatening, especially when reports reached the valley of a large force being organized to capture Frémont and his command or drive them from the country. When in the winter of 1845-46 it became known that Frémont was preparing to return to the States in spite of the near prospect of war between the United States and Mexico, many offers of assistance were made to Frémont, but the offers were generally refused pointblank. In the meantime the excitement increased on both sides and the feeling among the English and Americans became general that in bold and united action lay the only prospect of retaining a hold of the country and laying the foundation for future prosperity."

explorer and his men lent an attentive ear to the reports of an imminent and murderous attack on the settlers. Their own clash with Castro had prepared them to believe anything of Mexican treachery and aggression. It must have seemed imperative to Frémont that he keep himself at hand to help protect his countrymen.

Indeed, for some time both official threats against Americans and private outrages upon them had been numerous, and had been resented by quiet, substantial American residents as well as by the rougher immigrants. Only the previous October Captain Elliot Libbey, of the bark *Tasso*, had been set upon in the main street of San Francisco, stabbed, beaten, and left senseless—and nobody had been punished. American residents near San Francisco, together with ship-captains, merchants, and the American and British vice-consuls, had petitioned the commander of the U.S.S. *Levant* for the presence of a man-of-war in the Bay; for they believed the sub-prefect hostile to them, and declared that "the situation of all foreign residents at this place is extremely insecure and precarious." Farther inland, the settlers had long feared that hostile Californians would inflame the Indians against them. The previous year an attack by the Mexican authorities upon Sutter's Fort had been so imminent, in the opinion of various Americans, that the clerk Bidwell had ridden day and night to warn Sutter. Bidwell tells us that the "Californians were always talking of expelling Americans."

Most ominous of all, while Frémont was still proceeding northward into Oregon, Castro had made public his before-mentioned proclamation of April 17th warning the Americans once more that they had no right whatever to hold land unless they became Mexican citizens. A copy was displayed at Sutter's Fort. In this paper he instructed all magistrates that they could not legally permit any sale or other transfer of realty to foreigners; while he gave brusque notice to Yankee squatters that not only would they forfeit any purchase they had made, but they would "be subject, unless they retire voluntarily from

the country, to be expelled from it whenever the government may find it convenient." ⁷ Castro, who loved to strut and bluster, talked loudly of bringing armed forces to harry the gringos from the land; and it is no wonder that reports of his threats flew rapidly to the upper Sacramento.⁸

That there already existed a deep suspicion and a fast-mounting antagonism between the majority of the American settlers and the native Californians is unquestionable. Josiah Royce writes in his brief history of California as if Frémont's share in precipitating the so-called Bear Flag War had been the origin of that sullen hostility between the two peoples which was a painful though not very important sequel of the annexation of the province. Actually the tension between the races was already grave. While Americans looked upon most Californians as dissolute and treacherous idlers, while the Californians regarded most Americans as overbearing and brutal fellows intent only on gain, mutual understanding was difficult. Anglo-Saxon against Latin, Protestant against Catholic, strenuous pioneer against loiterer, they were sundered by instinctive antipathies. The part which Americans had played in various California revolts had excited animosity and distrust. Moreover, the native-born had resented the American annexation of Texas, and were well aware that the Spanish-speaking residents there had fared badly. While a small body of liberal and well-informed Californians really desired American rule, and some others were tempted by the rise in land-values which would follow annexation, the predominant Latin view was bitterly opposed to it.⁹

Frémont was impressed not only by Castro's threatening attitude, but by the reports that Mexican officials were trying

⁷ For the effect of this proclamation, see Wm. F. Swasey MS, Bancroft Library, p. 8. Swasey also lays emphasis upon the belief of settlers that the meeting of California leaders at Monterey intended to place the country under the British flag. They "would undoubtedly have succeeded in carrying that project into effect," he writes, but for the influence of General Vallejo, who favored American sovereignty.

⁸ Larkin Dispatches, State Department Archives, April 17, 1846.

⁹ Compare Smith, *War with Mexico*, I, p. 327.

to incite the savages to an uprising. Settlers who came to his camp at Neal's post declared that the fact that the semi-civilized Indians on the ranches were leaving their work and taking to the mountains pointed to imminent hostilities. Sutter also sent Frémont word that he believed that an Indian onslaught was being fomented by the wily Castro. On May 29th Gillespie left camp and rode forward to Yerba Buena:

On reaching Sutter's Fort [he later wrote the Navy Department], I was informed that Castro was already organizing his force, had engaged the Indians to burn the wheat when dry and ready for the sickle, had given a musket to an Indian of some note to shoot Mr. Sutter, and was preparing every measure and making every effort to cut off the emigration, and to leave the wayworn traveller, as also the settlers, without one morsel of bread.

At this time or a little later he also heard that Castro had promised his "miserable soldiery the ravishing of the women, and the destruction of the children."

The Indian threat was not to be taken lightly. Between Lassen's Ranch and San Diego, California contained perhaps twenty thousand aborigines, of whom half had a smattering of civilization; but current reports exaggerated their numbers to forty thousand or more.¹⁰ Both physically and mentally, this lazy, treacherous, and thievish race were greatly inferior to the best plains Indians, like the Sioux or Cheyenne; but when aroused and collected in numbers, they were a real menace. Frémont shared the almost universal frontier dislike of the savages, whom he regarded as untrustworthy, vindictive, and cruel. Once he had seen a party of immigrants after an Indian band had wreaked its worst upon it, the men mutilated and flayed alive, the women impaled on sharp stakes, and he had never forgotten the sight; like Theodore Roosevelt, he writes that some Indian cruelties were literally too horrible to be de-

¹⁰ Walter Colton, *Three Years in California*, p. 19ff.; Revere, *A Tour of Duty in California*, Ch. 12; of course some of the Indians long exposed to the civilizing work of the missions were, as Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* indicates, of fine character.

scribed. He still felt intense resentment over the murder of faithful Basil Lajeunesse. Telling the settlers that he would take precautions to protect them and their families, he kept a close surveillance over such Indians as he could, and made ready for active operations.

The Buttes of Sacramento, where Frémont camped at the end of May, constitute an isolated mountain ridge, a half-dozen miles in length, which runs up at the summit nearly two thousand seven hundred feet above the sea. He had chosen a point at the southeastern base with strong natural defenses and good water. As the days passed settlers brought him still more alarming reports. One rumor was that Castro was advancing against Frémont with two or three hundred armed men; another that Castro was planning to build a fort near the Bear River Pass to drive back the heavy concourse of American immigrants expected that summer.¹¹ In fact, Castro had been instructed the previous December by the Mexican Government to "redouble his precautions to avoid the introduction of these strangers."¹² But most disturbing of all were the more and more circumstantial reports of an impending Indian attack. The wheat throughout the valley was now like tinder, and Castro was said to be inciting the savages to set fire to it. This step would have been quite consonant with Mexican methods, and Hensley and Neal, still with Frémont, believed the story. So also did Sutter, farther down the river. He writes in his diary that he had rallied "most all of the men in my employ, for a campaign with the Mukelumney, which has been engaged by Castro and his officers to revolutionize all the Indians against me, to kill all the foreigners, burn their houses, and wheatfields."¹³ Frémont decided that "the time for me too had come." He resolved to forestall the Indians and strike a blow which would thoroughly intimidate them. Thus he would insure the safety of the settlers, and at the same time protect his communications to the rear,

¹¹ Monterey *Californian*, August 29, 1846.

¹² Edward Channing, *History of the United States*, V, Ch. 17.

¹³ Sutter, MS Diary, June 3, 1846.

making sure that if he moved south upon Monterey no formidable Indian force would be left behind him to cut off supplies and recruits from the American ranches.¹⁴

Sallying out at daybreak, Frémont and about fifty men rode rapidly down the west bank of the Sacramento. The dry season had turned the countryside brown; the wild oats were shaking sere in the wind, and the trees drooped dustily over the half-empty creeks. Along the river, where fish and acorns were plentiful, lay the largest Indian villages. No warning was given, and the savages were taken utterly by surprise. Riding into the first *rancheria* as the sun dispersed the river mist, Frémont's men raised a wild chorus of yells and opened fire, killing several Indians, and driving the rest, including several wounded, helter-skelter into the woods and the water. Then without delay the party hurried along the river to other villages, only to find that the news was traveling faster than themselves. The moment they came in sight of the rude wooden shelters, the smoking camp-fires, the assemblage of barking dogs and half-wild, flea-bitten ponies, they could see the Indians scurrying for shelter. Before sunset nearly all the villages had thus been emptied. As they rode down a hill toward the last one they could see the Indians in wild flight, and when they reached its huts the Sacramento was dotted with painted heads hastily making for the other shore. It was a "rude but necessary measure," says Frémont of the foray. No doubt he sincerely thought so, but in spite of the fact that his scouts reported many of the Indians in war paint and conducting war ceremonies, the necessity is doubtful.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the more impetuous American settlers had made up their minds to take rapid defensive measures against Castro and his Californians. They did not have Frémont's direct incitement, and the Bear Flag outbreak would doubtless have occurred without his presence; but they did have his indirect encouragement. This is the conclusion which must be drawn

¹⁴ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 516.

¹⁵ This is the judgment of Dellenbaugh; *Frémont and '49*, p. 330.

from a confusing and largely contradictory mass of evidence on the subject. Apparently to one settler he made one statement, and to another said something else—or they thought so; but on the whole he stimulated them to take active steps, while save for the Indian raid he kept his own party standing by as mere observers. He was still waiting on events, still gambling uneasily on that news of war which had not yet come. But the rougher frontiersmen did not wish to wait, and he was doubtless glad to see them act defensively.¹⁶ One contemporaneous story states that he even suggested offensive operations to William B. Ide, a leading settler, but this seems improbable. The more trustworthy account is that which certain immigrant leaders gave to a correspondent of *Niles's Register*, saying that he wished them to act, although cautiously declining to do so himself:¹⁷

Information was received by Mr. William B. Ide, living on the Sacramento, on the eighth of June, by letter brought up by Indian runner, that 200 mounted Mexicans were on their march up the Sacramento River, with the design of destroying the crops, burning the houses, and driving off the cattle belonging to the foreigners. [This was a baseless rumor.] Mr. Ide immediately visited the settlements on the Sacramento, and finding most of the men of the valley with Capt. Frémont, repaired to his camp. He then conversed with Capt. Frémont on the subject of the revolution, who advised immediate organization and resistance on the part of the foreigners, but declined any action on his part, or that of the men under his command.

Many settlers had reached the conclusion that, no matter what Frémont did, the time had come for them to strike. William Hargrave, who had settled in the Napa Valley two years earlier, tells us that his American neighbors considered the outlook "very gloomy"; that they feared the Mexicans would try to eject them; and that "we foreigners were ready

¹⁶ For evidence of the intensity of the settlers' resentment against the authorities, see B. F. Bonney, *Across the Plains by Prairie Schooner*, p. 12ff.

¹⁷ Vol. 73, p. 110ff.; for the story of the suggestion to Ide, see Hittell, *History of California*, II, p. 419ff.

to fight for our new homes." We have a similar account by William F. Swasey, for a time Sutter's bookkeeper. The settlers had heard, he states, that a large number of native Californians had met at Monterey to discuss a plan for declaring the territory free and placing it under the protection of a foreign flag, and that a majority were in favor of a British protectorate. The arrival of the *Collingwood* made English annexation seem a distinct danger, and Swasey writes that a spontaneous American revolt was on the point of breaking out when Frémont returned. Hargrave tells us that he was one of a party of nine or ten men who went to Frémont's camp to seek assistance:

Kelsey acted as spokesman [he says], and I do not recollect the language used, but my impression was at the time that Frémont, though very cautious and evidently averse to precipitate action, was willing enough to resume active operations, but he preferred to see for himself in how far the settlers of Napa and Sonoma Valley were ready to shake off the Mexican yoke. At any rate, he peremptorily refused to take any responsibility for sudden action on our part and endeavored to delay or frustrate our efforts. Whether Frémont expressed himself differently when he spoke to Kelsey alone, later in the day, I cannot say.¹⁸

Frémont was playing a waiting game; and though in retrospect it seems neither very heroic nor very scrupulous, what else could he do? He knew that the settlers were almost ready to act, he gave them encouragement, and he bided his time. Hargrave writes of the settlers that they "made no secret of our intentions to keep up the agitation till the opportunity arrived for a bold stroke. On our return to the Napa Valley we found that the revolutionary movement had gained more ground, and steps were taken at once to organize a force sufficient for our first enterprise—the capture of Sonoma." He adds that a majority of the men north of San Francisco Bay did not feel friendly toward Frémont at the beginning of the Bear Flag War, but became cordial later. John Fowler corroborates Hargrave's account. He declares that the fear of Mexican

¹⁸ Hargrave MS, pp. 3, 4; Swasey MS, pp. 8, 9; Bancroft Library.

attack was such that many settlers had been preparing to leave California for the States or for Oregon. Others wished to fight, and "I was in favor of acting at once, independent of Col. Frémont and without consulting him." Swasey says simply that "the Americans and foreigners generally were called together in Sacramento, Napa, and Sonoma Valleys for the purpose of resistance."¹⁹ It would seem that Swasey, who was close to Larkin, thought he knew what were the confidential instructions which Gillespie had brought to Frémont. "Their substance was," he writes, "that the Colonel should be governed by circumstances, and, if a movement appeared among the Americans to bring about an annexation to the United States, or to defeat the designs of another government (the object of the *Collingwood* being well understood), he should identify himself therewith, keeping near to California to be prepared for such emergency." This testimony, while worth little as regards the supposed instructions, is worth a good deal as to what was in Frémont's mind.

Frémont's waiting tactics were obviously if unescapably the game of an opportunist, and irritated even contemporary observers. But we should note that although later writers have criticized him for being too aggressive and precipitate, the American settlers at the time criticized him for being hesitant and overcautious. "We left him," says Hargrave, "most of us somewhat disgusted with the result of our interview." While he waited, having some difficulty in holding his own men in restraint, the first blow was struck. It was a blow for which, despite his Fabian tactics, he must take partial responsibility.²⁰

Early in June the fiery Castro had sent a Lieutenant Arcé to the north shore of San Francisco Bay to collect scattered horses bearing the government brand. This officer rounded up about one hundred and fifty animals, and was taking them southward by way of Sutter's Fort and the San Joaquin Valley. According to one account, the horses were to be used against

¹⁹ John Fowler, MS Narrative, Bancroft Library; Swasey MS, p. 26.

²⁰ Royce, *California*, p. 59; compare *Congressional Globe*, August 9, 1856.

Governor Pio Pico at Los Angeles in the civil war now impending; according to boastful statements of Arcé himself, they were to be used against American settlers in the Sacramento Valley. Necessarily, the whole countryside knew of the movement: Arcé, in the bright Mexican uniform of blue, red, and silver effects, supervising a dozen men, with their serapes, high Mexican saddles, and lassoes, as they herded the mounts at a trot toward the fords of the Sacramento, the cavalcade raising a thick cloud of dust under the June sky. They reached Sutter's Fort, stayed overnight as Sutter's guests, and went south the next day to the Cosumnes River, sixteen or eighteen miles distant, where they camped for the night. Here they were surprised by a party of a dozen or more settlers under Ezekiel Merritt, who disarmed them, took away their horses, and insultingly told them to carry the news to Castro.²¹ It was the first clear blow for American independence and control in California. Merritt was a tall, raw-boned frontiersman, fearless, simple, and fond of risks—a natural chieftain for the rougher immigrants. He regarded Frémont with enormous respect, and later Frémont called him his field lieutenant.

These two strokes, the raid against the Indians and the capture of Arcé's horses, raised in northern California the standard of Mars. No one in this remote Mexican province yet knew that a month earlier (May 12, 1846) Congress had declared war; that in the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Taylor had driven the Mexicans across the Rio Grande. The acts of Frémont and Merritt produced a feeling of consternation among some peace-loving Americans and all friendly Californians. When Sutter heard that Arcé had been attacked by a group of settlers, he expressed astonishment and indignation.²² But other Americans were immensely pleased. At last, they felt, California was about to be brought under the American flag. They saw in aggressive action their only defense from

²¹ W. B. Ide, letter to Commodore Stockton; one story says twenty-five settlers.

²² Sutter, *Diary*; Bidwell, *Century Magazine*, XIX, New Series, p. 519ff.

expulsion, their sole hope for a secure prosperity. Long afterward an observer asked an estimable pioneer who had four sons under Frémont if he felt any compunction in attacking the Californians. "He said he had Scripture example for it. The Israelites took the promised land of the East by arms, and the Americans must take the promised land of the West in the same way."²³

Frémont now saw that forces had been aroused which could not easily be suppressed; that events had set in motion men of headlong temper, and made it certain that the Mexican authorities would strike back. The result was his decision, still keeping in the background, to instigate an attack upon the little military post of Sonoma, fifteen miles north of San Francisco Bay.²⁴ Here were cannon, small arms, munitions, and horses, which Frémont needed; here lived General Mariano G. Vallejo, once military commandant of the province, who had supplied the cavalcade of horses to Arcé, and who (though by no means unfriendly to American annexation) had stood firmly behind Castro in preparing to resist invasion. Vallejo, a man of high principles, broad cultivation, and great wealth, stood almost the equal of Sutter as a powerful baron of northern California. He held vast estates of land, and huge herds of cattle, and at one time had built up a large armed force to defend California against the Russian menace from the north. At Sonoma, Castro had been busily engaged in obtaining more war supplies. Frémont evidently believed that a quick stroke, with the raising of the American flag, would do much to paralyze his activities, and would once for all end the danger that English naval forces might land in California. The explorer states that he sent Merritt, his field lieutenant, into the town "instructed to surprise" it.²⁵ It is clear that he had planned all the steps beforehand, and anticipated little or no resistance.

²³ Colton, *Three Years in California*, Ch. 10.

²⁴ Thomas S. Martin, MS Narrative, Bancroft Library, pp. 23, 24.

²⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 523. Compare the excellent series of articles by George Tays, "Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and Sonoma—A Biography and a History," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVI and XVII (1937-38).

The feat was quickly accomplished. Sonoma was an old mission establishment and military post, now a dull and shabby-looking place, infested by countless fleas. Its chief buildings—the mission, the barracks, the residences of Vallejo, his brother, and his brother-in-law, Jacob Leese, and a few others—looked upon a large plaza, disfigured after the careless California fashion by the skulls and skeletons of slaughtered beeves.²⁶ No soldiers were posted there. At break of day on June 14th some thirty-three or thirty-four armed settlers under Ezekiel Merritt rode into the unsuspecting hamlet, or as they grandiloquently called it, fortress, routed the astonished Californians out of bed, and took possession of the military equipment. This included nine brass cannon, two hundred and fifty muskets, and almost a hundredweight of powder. Vallejo, protesting, was taken with the rest to Frémont's camp on the American River, arriving late on the afternoon of the 15th. Here, while several of the prisoners sat on canvas bags filled with silver coins from Frémont's camp-chest, a council of war decided that they should be sent on to Sutter's Fort and imprisoned there.

They had not consulted the owner; and within the heavy adobe walls on this morning of June 16, 1846, occurred a dramatic clash between Frémont and Sutter. No one overheard it. But it seems certain that Sutter reproached Frémont for his harsh and arbitrary course, and that Frémont told him he had better support the uprising or keep his mouth shut. When the interview ended, Sutter came to Bidwell "greatly agitated, with tears in his eyes," and said that he had been informed that "if he did not like what he [Frémont] was doing, he would set him across the San Joaquin River, and he could go and join the Mexicans."²⁷ In other words, Frémont threatened to eject him (as a Mexican citizen and official, which he was) from the Fort, and take possession. The flurry over, the two men outwardly resumed their former attitude toward each

²⁶ Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, p. 333ff.

²⁷ Bidwell, *Century Magazine*, XIX, New Series, p. 520.

other. Actually, the episode marked the end of Sutter's control over his own post.

Frémont, declaring that Sutter would be severely punished if the prisoners there escaped, placed his assistant Kern in charge of them, and thereafter in the explorer's absence Kern virtually commanded Sutter's Fort. In short, the Captain had executed a double stroke: he had taken not merely Sonoma, but also the stronghold of the redoubtable Swiss. Both the barons of Northern California were now under his control, and he possessed two good bases for controlling all northern California. His treatment of the dignified and high-minded Vallejo, always a good friend to the American settlers, was harsh—Vallejo's biographer terms it "a contemptible and inexcusable outrage"—but he doubtless thought it necessary.²⁸ As for Sutter, he was shortly asked by Commander Montgomery to enter the service of the United States, acting as Kern's adjutant; and he did so, becoming a lieutenant of dragoons at fifty dollars a month!

Events now moved rapidly. The settlers who had captured Sonoma held ideas of their own as to how a revolt should be conducted. Such figures as William B. Ide, a shrewd, fussy, dogmatic Jack-of-all-trades, who had wandered west from Vermont, successively a farmer, school-teacher, carpenter, and rancher, or Dr. Robert Semple, an unbelievably long and lanky Kentuckian, who was quick on the trigger and loved an illiterate kind of rhetoric, are more amusing than impressive. But they tried hard to be dignified, and their efforts to organize their little uprising with some care, to give it orderly forms, and to justify it to the world in the best Jeffersonian manner, have an appealing quality. Sonoma was held by the settlers as a combination of fort and headquarters, and the little garrison rapidly increased from fifteen or eighteen to forty men. On

²⁸ Bidwell, *California in 1841-48*, pp. 164-167; Revere, *Tour of Duty*, p. 74ff.; Tays, "Vallejo," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVII, p. 225. Poor Vallejo was kept prisoner until August 3rd, when by order of Commodore Stockton he was released. He had vainly tried to obtain an interview with Frémont.

the very first day, June 14th, 1846, the captors tried to redeem themselves from the charge of being a loose mob of marauders by declaring the "Republic of California." This scheme of an independent republic had been in the minds of Americans for years. One recruit, William L. Todd, a nephew of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, took a piece of whitish brown cloth a yard and a half in length, and with either some paint or pokeberry juice (the accounts are conflicting) placed upon it a large star in the upper right-hand corner, and facing this at the top the figure of a grizzly bear. Native Californians gazing contemptuously at this design were heard later to call it "the shoat." Across the middle of the flag were painted the words, "California Republic." When it was hoisted on the empty Mexican staff, the Bear Flag Party and Bear Flag War had found an imperishable name. This standard was a symbol to which the settlers attached the utmost importance. It meant order. Only one unruly fellow dared to suggest that Sonoma be sacked, and "an unanimous indignant frown made him shrink from the presence of honest men." It meant liberty, for Dr. Semple was voluble in preaching the abstract principles of republicanism. It meant the eternal substitution of American rule for Mexican rule, as Ide formally asserted.²⁹

A proclamation which Ide, with the consent of the garrison, had written in hot haste between the hours of one and four in the morning was published June 18th, 1846, setting forth the principles of the revolt. It guaranteed peace and security to all persons not found under arms. The purpose of the uprising, it stated, was to overthrow a selfish, incompetent government, which had confiscated property, and shamefully oppressed the people of California by its enormous exactions on imported goods.³⁰

Frémont unquestionably looked upon all this with undiluted pleasure, for it suited his rather equivocal purposes precisely.

²⁹ Bidwell, *Century Magazine*, XIX, New Series, p. 521ff.; Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

³⁰ Monterey *Californian*, August 22, 1846.

He heard within a few days from Commander Montgomery of the *Portsmouth* at Sausalito, who was equally delighted; a "master stroke," said Montgomery, but it should have been "followed up by a rush upon Santa Clara, where Castro might have been taken by thirty men."³¹ Montgomery, like Frémont, was playing a double part. At the very time that he sent these hearty congratulations he was informing a messenger from Vallejo that neither the United States nor himself nor Frémont had any connection with the attack, and that he greatly sympathized with the Californian! For their part, the Bear Flag leaders were now eager to draw Frémont from his nominal neutrality. The shrewd William Ide in especial thought that the explorer was playing somewhat too Machiavellian a game. His scheme, as Ide said, was to keep in the background and avoid military action as an American officer, but at the same time to egg on the American settlers in steps which would provoke Castro to some punitive measure, when Frémont could openly take a hand. The Captain could thereupon allege that his interference had been necessary to save the Americans from brutal maltreatment, and that the revolt had advertised to the world the settlers' eagerness to be rescued from Mexican tyranny. Ide disliked this plan of "neutral conquest" as timid, selfish, and unnecessary. He believed that Frémont should cut boldly through the mesh of Mexican bluster and threats, and should have used Castro's proclamation against the American squatters as a signal for war.

Both the acts and entreaties of the Bear Flag fighters were now designed to draw Frémont into the open, and within a few days they succeeded. They were, of course, aided by events in other spheres. As early as June 7th Commodore Sloat at Mazatlan had become convinced by information from the interior that war was under way on the Rio Grande, and had sailed northward to seize the port of Monterey. He feared that the British admiral Sir George Seymour, now lying at San Blas with the powerful frigate *Collingwood* of eighty guns, might

³¹ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 334.

intervene and forestall American seizure by proclaiming a British protectorate; that is, he held precisely the apprehension that Frémont later confessed was one of his own governing motives. (The historian Hittell tells us that "as a matter of fact the British vice-consul had for a length of time been endeavoring to bring about British intervention.") Sloat did not reach Monterey until July 2nd, and even then hesitated. But meanwhile the same reports of hostilities which had sent him northward must have been leaking by other channels into California. On June 16th, Frémont, still uncertain but more and more convinced that news of war would soon come, wrote Montgomery in curiously equivocal terms. He began cautiously. It was his intention "to abandon the further prosecution of our exploration and proceed immediately across the mountainous country . . . to the eastward and thence to the frontier of Missouri." He added that the nature of his instructions and operations "do not contemplate any active hostility on my part in the event of war between the two countries; and therefore, although I am resolved to take such active and precautionary measures as I shall judge necessary for our safety, I am not authorized to ask from you any other than such assistance as, without incurring yourself unusual responsibility, you would feel at liberty to afford me." But he closed on a firmer note. The most significant part of his letter declared that he meant to stay where he was until about July 1st, and contemplated possible fighting: ³²

In the meantime, should anything be attempted against me, I cannot, consistently with my own feelings and respect for the national character of the duty in which I am engaged, permit a repetition of the recent insults we have received from General Castro. . . . Between Indians on the one hand and a hostile people on the other, I trust that our government will not severely censure any efforts to which we may be driven in defence of our lives and character. In this condition of things I can only then urgently request that you

³² Josiah Royce, "Montgomery and Frémont," *Century Magazine*, XIX, New Series.

will remain with the *Portsmouth* in the Bay of San Francisco, where your presence will operate strongly to check proceedings against us; and I would feel much more security in my position should you judge it advisable to keep open a communication with me by means of your boats. In this way you would receive the earliest information, and you might possibly spare us the aid of one of your surgeons in case of accident here.

The raising of the Bear Flag, the circulation of Ide's proclamation of the republic, and the news of the occupation of Sonoma aroused the immediate anger of the Mexican officials. Castro replied with a rhetorical proclamation on June 17th, denouncing the Bear Flag "adventurers." He had no forces beyond San Francisco Bay, but he promptly collected what troops he could farther south, and despatched them under an officer named Joaquin de la Torre to the relief of Sonoma. Their approach became known on June 23rd; the Bear Flag forces sent couriers to ask Frémont's help, and marched out under Lieutenant Ford to repulse the Californians. The result was a brisk engagement about a dozen miles from San Rafael, in which the Bear Flag men killed two Californians, wounded several more, and put the whole body to helter-skelter flight. While this happened, Frémont was casting off all disguise and taking the field, glad to be called to arms. He made up his mind that the crisis had arrived, and that it was "unsafe to leave events to mature under unfriendly, or mistaken, direction."³³

Frémont and his rescue party reached Sonoma on June 25, 1846, and with an augmented force of one hundred and sixty men at once took up the pursuit of de la Torre's retreating troops. He was at last acting with genuine resolution. He believed that his open entry into the struggle would prevent the Bear Flag settlers from being ultimately crushed by the stronger forces of Castro, and would deter any British agents from proclaiming a protectorate of California. If war had begun between the United States and Mexico, all would be well. On

³³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 520.

the other hand, if peace were maintained between the two nations he would take his punishment with a good face. Part of that punishment would certainly be dismissal from the service in disgrace, and Frémont took steps to anticipate this by drafting his resignation and laying it aside in an envelop to be sent to Senator Benton, who could transmit it to the War Department at his discretion.

It was only by good luck and an adroit ruse that de la Torre's crippled force escaped south of San Francisco Bay to a point of safety. The Californians had better horses than the Americans. De la Torre, having thus gained the head start, put a false message into the hands of an Indian, announcing an imminent attack upon Sonoma by Castro himself; and when the Indian was captured, Frémont hastily turned back from his pursuit to protect the threatened town. De la Torre was then fortunate enough to find a large boat at Sausalito on the north shore of the Bay, and made his way across. The chagrin of the Americans at failing to crush their antagonists was extreme. They had as yet lost no men in open battle, but when Lieutenant Ford was marching to repulse de la Torre near San Rafael on the Bay, the settlers had come upon the bodies of two American immigrants, Tom Cowan, or Cowie, and a man named Fowler, murdered by the roadside. It was later asserted that they had been tortured to death, and that their disemboweled and mutilated corpses presented a shocking spectacle. Gillespie sent gory details to the Navy Department. Since Cowan had been widely known and greatly liked, the episode excited a desire for vengeance. A little later (June 28th), when the Americans held possession of San Rafael, three Californians were landed from a boat under the very eyes of Frémont's party on the shore of Point San Pedro. Frémont ordered Carson to take two men and cut them off. Carson, after coming back for further instructions, then galloped down to the shore and with his companions halted and shot the strangers, one of whom was an old man. This at least seems the most probable version of what occurred, for many conflicting stories have

been told. Frémont later wrote that the men were killed by "my scouts, mainly Delawares" in retaliation for the murder of Fowler and Cowan; Alexis Godey declared they had been shot by Carson, then on patrol duty, when they resisted; John Fowler declared that Carson and a companion were drunk and so shot them; James O'Farrell, an Irish resident of San Rafael, who apparently did not see the affair, later deposed (in the heat of the Presidential campaign of 1856) that Frémont ordered no quarter given the men; William Swasey writes that Carson alone was responsible and "the firing was perfectly justifiable under the circumstances."³⁴ Justifiable this cold-blooded murder certainly was not; but the question of the responsibility is one that cannot now be decided with any certainty. The weight of evidence is stronger against Carson, who repeatedly showed himself heedless of human life, than against Frémont, who was always most careful of it.

Meanwhile Frémont, after finding Sonoma perfectly safe, had followed de la Torre's cold trail to Sausalito. Here he made camp, and we have a good picture of him as the Yankee skipper of the trading-ship *Moscow* found him at rest:³⁵

As yet I had not seen the captain, but my imagination had pictured him out somehow as I thought he ought to look. Of course a knowledge of his exploits and renown led me to suppose that I should see a full-whiskered military-looking man, towering in size above all his command, stiff with uniforms and straps, looking blood,

³⁴ Swasey writes that the men were killed trying to escape. "The order to fire upon them was given by Kit Carson, and although Frémont has been frequently accused of having given the said order, he was not personally present at the time." MS Narrative, Bancroft Library, p. 10. Godey's narrative exculpating Frémont is in the *New York Evening Post*, October 30, 1856. Two of the men killed were twin sons, nineteen years old, of Francisco de Haro, after whom a street in San Francisco is named.

³⁵ Narrative of William D. Phelps, *New York Tribune*, August 14, 1856. Phelps in 1871 under the pseudonym "Webfoot" published *Fore and Aft, or Leaves from the Life of an Old Sailor*. For his services to Frémont, Captain Phelps later tried (with Frémont's endorsement) to collect \$10,000 from the United States Government; but when Gillespie certified that \$50 would be ample, received that sum! *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XV (1936), pp. 62, 63.

bullets, and grizzly bears. But I saw nothing of the kind. After a survey of the different groups about the camp, I could discover no one that bore resemblance to my picture, and going up to a tall, lank-looking specimen of a Kentuckian, dressed in a greasy deerskin shirt and trousers to match, and a coonskin cap on his head, with the tail in front, I asked if the captain was in the camp. The individual (the long doctor) replied in the affirmative, and pointed out to me as Capt. Frémont a slender and well-proportioned man, of sedate but pleasing countenance, sitting in front of a tent. His dress, as near as I remember, was a blue flannel shirt, after the naval style, open at the collar, which was turned over; over this a deerskin hunting shirt, figured and trimmed in hunter's style, blue cloth pantaloons and neat moccasins, all of which had very evidently seen hard service. His head was not cumbered by hat or cap of any shape, but a light cotton handkerchief, bound tightly round his head, surmounted a suit which might not appear very fashionable at the White House or be presentable at the Queen's levee; but to my eye it was an admirable rig to scud under or fight in.

A few minutes' conversation convinced me that I stood in the presence of the King of the Rocky Mountains. He said "his operations were against the military force of the country; that his government had been outrageously insulted in his person, and he would compel from Castro a public apology or hunt him from the country." Capt. Frémont now determined on spiking and disabling the guns of the fort on the opposite side of the passage, as this place, if garrisoned by the enemy, would much obstruct the passage of ships and consequently endanger the safety of supplies which might arrive by sea.

Frémont's designs, with the whole area north and west of San Francisco in his hands, were by this time of a most ambitious character. He meant to rally the settlers into an army sufficient to defeat Castro and capture Monterey and Santa Barbara. Arcé's horses and those at Sonoma had given him an adequate supply of mounts; at Sonoma he had taken guns and munitions which supplemented the powder, lead, and caps sent him by Captain Montgomery of the *Portsmouth*. Now on

July 2nd, crossing San Francisco Bay to Fort Point, he seized the little fort of El Castillo de San Joaquin there, ruinous and quite ungarrisoned, spiked its ten old Spanish brass guns, and captured some additional supplies. The spiking party consisted, besides Frémont, of Kit Carson, Gillespie, and Captain Phelps of the *Moscow*, with some of Frémont's and Phelps's men. Amid all his anxieties, the explorer's poetic vein prompted him to bestow upon the entrance of San Francisco Bay the name of the Golden Gate, an appellation that has become immortal. Settlers were flocking in to reinforce the American camps at both Sutter's Fort and Sonoma in steadily increasing numbers. Reports of the successes of Frémont, Merritt, and Ide, of the brutal murder of Cowan and Fowler, and of the proclamation of a California republic, had aroused much excitement and enthusiasm. Native Californians of the region, threatened with severe punishment if they took up arms, were making haste to declare their peaceful intentions. The road was open for a triumphant march southward.³⁶

From these new designs of Frémont was born the California Battalion, the little army which he was to use in his "conquest." On July 4, 1846, he was back again in Sonoma, and participated in a celebration which included much firing of salutes, speeches, and a ball. During that day and the next, the settlers were organized with Frémont's men into the Battalion, comprising four companies of 234 men in all, grim and formidable-looking soldiers. Frémont took over the command from Ide, and calling the men before him, made a brief address, dwelling on their joint responsibilities, enjoining them to do nothing to discredit their cause, and promising energetic action until Castro was subdued. Ide replied in behalf of the settlers. At once a firm discipline was given to the force, Frémont bringing it under rigid control and requiring long hours of drill. Simultaneously, he sent out foraging parties which requisitioned

³⁶ Compare the letter of one Grigsby, Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 1, 29th Cong., 2d. Sess., p. 665.

horses and drove in cattle to be butchered for food.³⁷ For the nonce, this looked a good deal like robbery to the Californians, but the government later paid them and reimbursed Sutter for the use of his Fort.

The California Battalion, a motley array of voyageurs, trappers, scouts, former sailors, frontier farmers, and ranchmen, was a body unlike any other that has ever fought on American soil, and yet with close affinities to our pioneer fighters in all generations. Miles Standish, Robert Rogers, Daniel Boone, and Davy Crockett would have recognized the breed at once. Most of the men wore broad-brimmed hats pulled low over the eyes, shirts of buckskin or blue flannel, and buckskin trousers and moccasins, all much the worse for wear and smeared with dirt, blood, and gunpowder. From a leather girdle about every man's waist hung an ugly-looking bowie or hunter's knife, and sometimes a brace of pistols. Most of the recruits were bearded and long-haired; all were sunburnt and fierce of visage. A single sorry-looking bugle sounded the calls. One member of Frémont's original force, a tall, manly Illinoisan named Risdon Moore (whom Frémont likened to one of Cromwell's men), had hung back, feeling that these military operations against the peaceful Californians were unjustifiable; but Frémont had quickly converted him by clapping him overnight in a hot, ill-ventilated dungeon of Sutter's Fort, swarming with fleas. The others were athirst for the fray. Gillespie, who had continued a close adviser of Frémont, was made a major of the Battalion, and the roster of members who then or a little later received officers' commissions—Owens, Ford, Swift, Sears, Grigsby, Hastings, Thompson, Jacobs, McLean, Hensley, Gibson—showed the predominance of the old Anglo-Saxon stock.

At this moment, with the advance about to begin, came news which Frémont must have received with a sigh of relief; news that war between the United States and Mexico had opened, and

³⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 526; *Congressional Globe*, August 9, 1856; Fort Sutter Papers, Huntington Library, Vol. V; *Niles's Register*.

that powerful American warships were in California waters. His gamble had succeeded; his position was now regularized. Commodore Sloat of the Pacific squadron, anchored at Mazatlan, had received information on May 31st of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. With inexcusable timidity, he had refused to act, though he held explicit instructions from Washington that the moment he received certain news of war he was to occupy San Francisco and such other California ports as he could reach. Sailing north after more than a week's delay, on July 2nd he was in Monterey, with the town under his guns. Here he again hesitated, and in fact even made the usual call of courtesy on the authorities.³⁸ But learning of Frémont's operations, and still fearful that Sir George Seymour of the British fleet on the coast might raise the British flag, he took his preposterously belated action. On July 7th, he demanded the surrender of the town, and landed two hundred and fifty sailors and marines to hoist the American colors. He also sent orders to the *Portsmouth* in San Francisco Bay to seize Yerba Buena or San Francisco, and on July 9th despatched a courier to Frémont informing him of all that had occurred.

The Bear Flag War was now over, and the Mexican-American conflict in California had taken its place. Frémont, receiving from Montgomery on the evening of July 10th the news that Sloat's flag was flying over Monterey, spent a few days preparing his force and making certain that the Sacramento Valley was secure, and then set out from Sutter's Fort with one hundred and sixty picked men for that town. He could now feel that events had justified him. He had played his cards one after the other in the firm belief, shared by Gillespie, that the renewed rupture of American and Mexican relations was a prelude to certain war. He had so played his hand that when the vacillating Sloat came upon the scene all California beyond San Francisco Bay was in American hands and a large and well-equipped land force was ready to coöperate with the navy.

³⁸ Smith, *War with Mexico*, I, p. 334.

His course had been illegal, and to the last degree opportunistic, but it had succeeded.

Yet had Frémont foreseen how harshly a group of historians would later criticize his course in turning back from his explorations, helping foment the Bear Flag uprising, and finally assuming its open leadership, he would have been far less complacent than he doubtless felt when Commodore Stockton congratulated him in Monterey harbor. This criticism has been stated by such writers as H. H. Bancroft, Josiah Royce, and Theodore H. Hittell in terms varying from mild severity to extreme condemnation. Frémont is accused of acting without specific authority and, of course, that charge is true. He was six months' travel by a dangerous and difficult route from Washington; through Gillespie he had received news and letters which made him feel it was his duty to assume a certain independent responsibility. He did just what a long line of officers of the English-speaking race have always done in emergencies. The British Empire owes half its territory to subalterns, generals, ship-captains, and merchants who have acted without authority and been applauded later. Andrew Jackson had no authority in 1818 to invade the Spanish territory of Florida and seize Pensacola, but he did it. Commodore T. A. C. Jones had had no authority in 1842 for the occupation of Monterey, but he occupied it. Frémont doubtless believed that an officer who will not go beyond out-of-date and insufficient orders in an emergency, who will not use his own discretion, is not worth his salt. Admiral Sloat was just such an officer, and the Administration in Washington regarded Sloat's timidity and vacillation on the Pacific Coast as a national misfortune, making that fact quite clear to everybody.

Frémont has been accused, again, of taking action which, orders or no orders, was not justified by the facts of the California situation, or his knowledge of the general wishes of the Federal Government. But to this he could have answered that the position of the American settlers in the Sacramento Valley, as he found it on his return to that region, warranted him in

the "precautionary" measures of which he wrote to Montgomery on June 16th. And so far as it went, this would have been a good answer. It is useless to deny that the fear of an Indian attack was general; Sutter himself feared it. It cannot be denied, moreover, that Castro was acting in a way which filled the American settlers with apprehension for their property and personal safety—his own orders and proclamations prove that—or that Frémont had some reason for fearing a sudden British proclamation of some form of protectorate. Royce is especially caustic in his treatment of the panic of the Bear Flag leaders regarding Castro. But of this one of the ablest historians of the period, Justin H. Smith, with much fuller and more recent knowledge than Royce, has written: ³⁹

First, many of the settlers had ample reasons to feel alarmed: the illegality of their presence; Castro's sudden and cruel seizure of Americans in 1840; his attack upon Frémont in violation (the Americans believed) of a promise; official notices, issued about May 1, to the effect that a majority of the Americans were liable to be expelled at the convenience of the authorities; Castro's warlike preparations; his talk of moving against the immigrants with armed forces; and reports, more or less authentic, and reliable, from various persons regarding what he said, or intended. Secondly, the contemporary testimony of Frémont, Gillespie, and other Americans—some of it given under oath—that alarm was actually felt is too strong to be rejected. Much has been made [by Royce] of Bidwell, a clerk of Sutter's, who tells us that alarm was not felt. But (1) his statement was made thirty years after the events; (2) he admits that he was not on good terms with Frémont, and his statement aims to show that Frémont invented the story of alarm as an excuse for his conduct; (3) his statement is in other respects clearly inaccurate; (4) it assumes that he knew the sentiment of all the persons on the Sacramento, yet proves that an important fact may have been known to but few; (5) it shows that at the critical time he was absent in the mountains; (6) it says, "Californians were always talking of expelling Americans," and therefore were talking of it in April, 1846; (7) his book mentions that in 1845 an attack

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 529.

upon New Helvetia was so confidently expected that he rode night and day to warn Sutter....

Almost equally violent is Royce's attack upon the "legend" that the British had designs upon California; but the point is not that this legend was exaggerated, as it was, but that all kinds of Americans in responsible posts—Polk, Buchanan, Bancroft, Benton, and others—believed it, and that California settlers believed it. This being so, Frémont may be excused for believing it. The apprehension that England would forestall us was dwelt upon in the Senate early in 1846; it was widely voiced by the American press. "The expansive course of Great Britain," says the historian just quoted, "remarks dropped by English writers, repeated warnings dropped from our diplomatic and consular agents at Mexico, and the consensus of opinion in California, Mexico, France, and the United States were quite enough to warrant suspicions of England."⁴⁰ Sloat, Stockton, and Larkin all feared Rear Admiral Sir George Seymour's intentions. British policy during the last century has usually been extremely considerate of American susceptibilities, and it was really so in this instance. But under all the circumstances Sloat and Frémont had some reason to fear that the strong British naval force on the Pacific Coast might be used to proclaim a protectorate, or at least to gain a diplomatic foothold there for use in the Oregon controversy. Sloat swung northward in that belief, Frémont swung southward. They believed that they had to guard against a contingency. Had such a contingency actually existed, Frémont's activities along the coast, and his return at a critical juncture from the north, might well have accentuated the feeling of the British officers that the United States was determined to obtain California,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 324; compare T. G. Cary, *Conquest of Alta California* (MS; Boston Athenaeum); London *Times*, September 28, 1846. Governor Pio Pico wrote the British vice-consul, J. A. Forbes, on June 29, 1846: "The undersigned is satisfied that Great Britain, being an ally of the Republic of Mexico, and both nations having great consideration for each other, will doubtless give her protection." *California Historical Society Quarterly*, X (1931), p. 114.

and that it would be impossible to act without coming into sharp collision with American aims and agents.

Above all, Frémont has been assailed as a mischief-maker who spilt innocent blood, aroused a resentment among the native Californians which quadrupled the difficulties of the subsequent American occupation, and laid the foundations for a lasting animosity between these Californians and the Americans. Unquestionably he acted in flat violation of the instructions to Larkin, as relayed to him. If he had not so acted, it is barely conceivable that a quiet, peaceable annexation of California might have occurred. But it must be remembered that the Bear Flag uprising did not cost a dozen lives all told. A more nearly bloodless conquest or revolution it would be hard to find. The probabilities are that, in view of the outbreak of the Mexican War, and in view also of Castro's vigorous defensive efforts, an armed clash was inevitable, and that northern California could not have been secured with a shorter casualty list. As for the ill-feeling aroused by the Bear Flag uprising, much of it appears quickly to have evaporated. The American settlers, after Frémont took full control, bore themselves for the most part in an exemplary manner. There were no outrages, no depredations, and few aberrations from the rule of strict obedience and orderliness; Alexis Godey tells us, truthfully,⁴¹ that Frémont's operations "were eminently characterized by a regard for the rights and interest of the inhabitants of the country through which his forces marched, which secured to him the kindest feelings of regard and respect of the entire California population." It is true that there was a sudden angry flare-up of the Californians against the Americans after Sloat raised his flag, and much semi-guerrilla warfare. But where did it occur? Not in northern California where Frémont had acted, but in southern California. What little permanent ill-feeling the events of 1846 left was largely inevitable. Any historian who supposes that two races so alien in blood, religion, habits, temper, and aims as the Americans and the

⁴¹ New York *Evening Post*, October 30, 1846.

Mexican-Californians could have reversed the positions of governed and governing without sharp friction is somewhat naïve.

At bottom, what seems most irritating in Frémont's course is its lack of candor and directness, its consistent opportunism, and its frequent descent into what can only be termed equivocation. He headed an exploring expedition which he also made a military expedition; he lingered in California under pretense of refitting his men and searching for an estate when his real purpose was otherwise; he turned back into California under still other pretexts quite divorced from his true aim; he spoke in two voices to the California leaders, to the settlers, to Montgomery, and even to Benton; he turned two faces to the world. He seemed to lack straightforwardness and rugged strength of character, and bore himself with less resolution and direct honesty than befitted an American leader in such a situation. Andrew Jackson in West Florida had behaved even more lawlessly than Frémont in California, and in his treatment of Ambrister and Arbuthnot came close to the line of murder; but he was never inconstant or evasive. His conduct was marked by a firmness and grim strength that do not appear in Frémont's. And yet it must be said that Frémont's position was difficult. A certain duplicity was stamped upon the expedition from the outset, for the government, or at least Secretary Bancroft, Senator Benton, and others had anticipated that it might serve two purposes. Moreover, the murky atmosphere in which he moved during May and June, knowing little, suspecting much, fearing and hoping more, made it difficult to act with firm candor. After all, the important object in studying these events of 1846 is not to condemn or commend but to understand. Frémont's motives were patriotic. His temperament being so adventurous; his understanding of the ambitions of Bancroft and Benton being so clear; the situation in California offering so many hazards; the fact that Gillespie traveled six hundred miles into the wilderness beyond Monterey to find him being so remarkable; Gillespie's story of the rapid drift of Mexico to war chiming so precisely with Frémont's own

expectations; the pleas of the settlers for protection being so fervent—when we realize all this, we can understand why he acted as he did. No “secret instructions” are necessary to explain it.

He meant to be useful to his government and compatriots, and beyond doubt he was. Of course, it is impossible to-day to believe that he decisively affected the course of events on the Pacific. California would have fallen under American sovereignty almost as easily, though not as soon, as it did, had he turned back on the Oregon Trail to Missouri in the spring of 1846. But his exploits nevertheless laid the basis of a popular legend that was to carry him far—in 1856, even within sight of the Presidency.

XIX

The California Battalion

ON July 19, 1846, the approach of Frémont's California Battalion to Monterey was heralded by a heavy cloud of dust under a burning sun, from which emerged the men in a long and wild-looking file. Frémont rode first, a thin, wiry, energetic young man, with flowing hair, a bearded sun-bronzed face, and eyes that seemed to burn with a consuming fire—"such an eye!" wrote a British naval officer. He was dressed much as the Yankee skipper had seen him at Sausalito, in buckskin trousers, blouse, and moccasins, a blue shirt thrown open at the neck, and a felt hat on his head. Behind him came five swarthy Delaware Indians who served as his body-guard. After them, on sturdy ponies, rode the men, two and two, their long, heavy Hawkins rifles thrown across their saddle-pommels. With heavy knives slung at their hips, with the sun glinting on their polished rifles and revolvers, and with their gaunt, steel-muscled, determined look, they seemed a force which few would care to meet. Many were even blacker than the Indians, and their long untrimmed hair, the heavy dark beards through which their white teeth gleamed, gave them a savage aspect. The women stared timidly but admiringly at them through the grated windows. They camped that night just outside the town, among the firs and pines near the sea, and their watch-fires threw a quivering light into the forest glades and far along the waves.¹

Frémont, as usual, had an eye to the beauty of his camp.²

¹ See descriptions in Walter Colton, *Deck and Port*; Lieutenant Fred Walpole, R.N., *Four Years in the Pacific in Her Majesty's Ship Collingwood* (2 vols.).

² Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 534.

"Before us, to the right, was the town of Monterey, with its red-tiled roofs and large gardens enclosed by high adobe walls, capped with red tiles; to the left the view was over the ships in the bay and on over the ocean, where the July sun made the sea-breeze and the shade of the pine trees grateful." In the harbor still rode not merely Sloat's flagship the *Savannah*, but for a brief time the powerful eighty-gun flagship *Collingwood* of the British admiral, Sir George Seymour. According to Sloat's purser, an able, careful young man named Rodman M. Price, later governor of New Jersey, who had fumed angrily at his chief's indecision and delays, Seymour had said when he arrived three days earlier: "Sloat, if your flag was not flying on shore, I should have hoisted mine there." Down at Santa Barbara, as Price later recalled, was the English frigate *Juno*.³

When Frémont went aboard the *Savannah* to call on Sloat, he found an aged, sallow, nervous little man, not at all certain of himself and much concerned over the legality of everything done in California. Secretary Bancroft was shortly to write him, very truly, that "your anxiety not to do wrong has led you into a most unfortunate and unwarranted inactivity." He timidly asked Frémont under what authority, what instructions, he had taken up arms against the Mexican officials in California? "I informed him," Frémont tells us, "that I had acted solely on my own responsibility, and without any expressed authority from the government to justify hostilities." The wavering, overcautious little Commodore was evidently shocked and puzzled. He had hoped to learn that Frémont had received orders through Gillespie that would serve to justify his own action in taking Monterey and Yerba Buena. Indeed, he remarked that Frémont's operations in the Sacramento Valley had been one reason for his decision to occupy the coast. Now he was left in an unhappy frame of mind, uncertain that he had not gone too far. He made it clear that he disapproved

³ See Price's long statement in Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 539-542. Price, whose later career showed him a man of judgment and insight, believed that Sloat's timidity had almost lost California to the British, as Frémont's decision had helped to save it; another bit of evidence on American psychology of the time.

of Frémont; made it clear also that he would sit tight and undertake no aggressive plan of action. Frémont, who had looked forward to a campaign against Castro and the capture of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, returned to shore somewhat discouraged.⁴

American history was being made rapidly in those days. Zachary Taylor, having driven the Mexicans across the Rio Grande, was advancing from Matamoras into the northern part of the Republic. General Kearny was concentrating an army at Bent's Fort to invade New Mexico and California. On June 15, 1846, Secretary Buchanan and the British minister had signed at Washington the treaty partitioning Oregon at the forty-ninth parallel, and thus adding to our country the territory of three states, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. The great Mormon invasion of the West, sixteen thousand strong, had crossed the Mississippi, and its advance guard, using Frémont's early reports as guide, was at Council Bluffs on the Missouri preparing for the passage of the plains. A new and greater flood of emigration was embarking on the California and Oregon Trail. Among the California trains was the company of J. T. Reed and the Donners, destined the ensuing winter to be caught in the Sierras by heavy blizzards, and to furnish the Far West with one of its most horrible tragedies; among them was also Edwin Bryant, who was to become alcalde of San Francisco and to write a book from which we have already quoted. In New England, the war was unpopular; in the West, it had been received with enthusiasm, fifty thousand volunteers had flocked to the colors, and U. S. Grant and Robert E. Lee were about to win their first laurels. Every-

⁴ When Sloat left Mazatlan for Monterey on June 8th he had received word by an express from Mexico City that the battles of Resaca de la Palma and Palo Alto had been fought. He nevertheless wrote the Secretary of the Navy on June 6th that since he had not been apprised of a formal declaration of war, he would take no aggressive action in California! He added that he found it humiliating to refrain from action "while it appears to the world that we are actually at war on the other coast." Many of his officers naturally felt outraged by his course. Bancroft's sharp letter of rebuke, dated August 13, 1846, is printed in Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, p. 537.

where, east and west alike, the country's eyes were fixed upon Taylor and the Rio Grande, upon the Santa Fé objective of Kearny, and upon far-off California.

Commodore Sloat, worried lest he had exceeded his authority in belatedly seizing Monterey, and perplexed over the problem of carrying out his orders to conciliate the Californians when the Bear Flag men and Frémont were already in arms against them, soon found an escape. He sailed away from the coast in the ship *Levant*, leaving the command of the *Congress* and *Cyane* to his ambitious, smart, and headstrong second, Commodore R. F. Stockton; commissioning him to use these warships "to restore peace and good order to this territory," as Stockton wished to do. This officer had Frémont's energy, together with a flamboyancy all his own; and like Frémont, he believed in handling the Californians with a firm hand. Between the new Commodore and the Captain there sprang up a warm and enduring friendship. They were much together, and the result was the issuance on July 29th over Stockton's name of a bombastic proclamation, abusing Castro for his "repeated hostilities and outrages," declaring that daily reports came from the interior of "scenes of rapine, blood, and murder," and asserting that after protecting the lives and property of American settlers and restoring order, Stockton would "leave the people to manage their own affairs in their own way." At the same time, Stockton and Frémont planned an energetic land campaign, which should either take Castro prisoner or drive him, Pico, and other dangerous officials into Mexico.

Their plan of operations for this purpose was simple and promised to be effective. Castro was supposedly waiting near Los Angeles with about five hundred men and seven or eight pieces of artillery, a little army that was slowly increasing. Frémont's battalion was taken into the naval service, and he was made major in command, with Gillespie as captain; the men were allowed the regulation ten dollars a month pay (which they considered too little), and were reinforced by 80 marines. This body of 220 hardy fighters was carried by sea

in the sloop *Cyane* to San Diego, a trip which made Kit Carson and others ingloriously seasick. Landed here to cut off Castro from the rear, they sent out men to scour the country and press horses into service. Much to their surprise, Frémont's battalion were received with cordiality by the principal inhabitants and given every aid in obtaining supplies; they fared admirably.

In fact, for the week or ten days that they were outfitting, Frémont and his men enjoyed a beguiling mixture of picnicking and foraging in the beautiful countryside about San Diego. Irrigation was widely practised here, and repeatedly they came upon a ranch that was a veritable Garden of Eden, blooming with vivid flowers and crowded with pear trees, peach trees, olive trees, fig trees, and vines on which the grapes were already purple. The days were bright and hot, the skies a dome of cloudless light, and the nights cool and star-spangled. Forty years later Frémont remembered the most enchanting of these excursions. The noonday heat forced a halt in a pretty garden near a farmhouse. Here the water from a little stream flowed into a basin some fifteen feet across, kept pure and clear by a cement coping. Pomegranates and other fruit trees hung over the water, and they lounged under the branches as they roasted a portion of lamb on skewers at a fire, and ate it with bread, fruit, and wine. At the end of the refitting period, on August 8th, about one hundred and twenty of the battalion (the rest having been left to garrison San Diego) took up their march for Los Angeles, still through a country whose luxuriant fertility, with the golden wheat in shock, impressed the volunteers.

Their victory was won more easily than Frémont, who learned that Castro and Pico had effected a juncture and were encamped upon a mesa in front of the town, had expected. Beyond San Pedro, he joined Commodore Stockton with a force of 360 men and several pieces of artillery. To face this formidable little body Castro and Pico had only about two hundred and fifty men, ill-armed and divided between partisans of the north and the south. On the northward march no hostile figures were seen except a few scattered horsemen who vanished

on the horizon. On the afternoon of August 13, 1846, the little American army entered Los Angeles unopposed, and with a brass band in front marched through streets lined with curious and not unfriendly people, more like "a parade of home guards than an enemy taking possession of a conquered town."⁵ Castro's force, frightened by the American advance, had buried part of its powderless guns, and scattered to the four winds. Its commander was reported hidden in the cloudy-penciled mountains overlooking the San Gabriel plain.

The results of this occupation of the official capital of California, and of a series of proclamations which Stockton in his usual histrionic fashion immediately issued, were at first gratifying. Stockton declared that while California was now a possession of the United States, under martial law, the people would be unmolested in their ordinary business, would be considered citizens of the territory, and in due time would be given a regular governor, secretary, and legislative council. A reign of justice and amity seemed about to begin. Many prominent native Californians surrendered, and were released on parole. Sentiment rallied to the American side as manifestly certain of victory. The first California newspaper, of course in English, appeared—the *Californian*, established at Monterey, on August 15, 1846; the first public school was opened. In September, some successful municipal elections were held. Chaplain Colton was appointed alcalde of Monterey, and his administration proved immediately popular. The Mexican inhabitants were delighted when a large number of horses, driven off by the Indians, were restored to them, while Stockton evinced a gratifying tact in settling some civil disputes brought before him. His intention was, after creating a legislative council, to make himself governor, but he did not wish to hold that office long. He was revolving an absurd dream of a spectacular attempt upon Mexico City from the west, landing his troops at Acapulco and marching them overland.

Frémont was sent northward by Stockton to his old positions

⁵ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, pp. 566, 567.

in the Sacramento Valley, with instructions to muster as large a force as he could, and with the promise that as soon as Stockton began the invasion of Mexico, he would be made governor of the province. Meanwhile, California was divided into three military districts of which Stockton took charge of that in the middle, Frémont the one at the north, and Gillespie the one at the south. Frémont's labors were especially easy. Surrounded by his friends and associates of the Bear Flag War, and fearing no enemies, for the native Californians were cut off from Mexico and were overawed by the large population of American settlers, he could begin recruiting his California Battalion to full strength without worries. But Gillespie's task was very difficult. Southern California was closely in touch with Mexico, the native Californians were restless and numerous, and the country held few Americans and few other residents who sympathized with American aims. His force was pitifully small, for despite Larkin's warnings, Stockton could supply him with only about fifty volunteers. When Gillespie's rigid military rule aroused discontent, such a corporal's guard was merely a temptation to an outbreak.

While Frémont was busiest recruiting his forces, the inevitable flare-up set southern California in sudden flame. An attack on the Los Angeles garrison occurred on the night of September 22, 1846; four hundred Californians were shortly in arms; and when they cut off an American detachment of twenty-five men at the Chino farm near the town, the movement gained powerful headway.⁶ Gillespie was overborne with a rush. Having no fortifications and few arms, he was compelled on September 29th to surrender Los Angeles on favorable terms, being allowed to embark his troops upon a mer-

⁶ H. H. Bancroft deals thoroughly with the causes of this revolt in his *History of California*, V, p. 305ff. As he writes, a large element in the Los Angeles population had always been turbulent, lawless, and uncontrollable; the inexperienced Gillespie promulgated some needlessly oppressive measures; and a wild young fellow named Varela gathered other wild spirits about him and began the fighting. Within a short time nearly all the male inhabitants of southern California were in a sense engaged in the revolt; but the rebel leaders could not arm even two hundred of them.

chant ship at San Pedro. When a few days later Stockton, who was at San Francisco, heard of this, he was filled with anger and mortification, and forthwith despatched a strong force against the rebels.

With the guerrilla fighting at the south, the marching and countermarching of petty forces which occupied the period from October 1 to December 15, 1846, we have nothing to do. It is sufficient to say that, in these seventy-five days, Stockton's operations against Los Angeles accomplished nothing, and that early in October, Captain William Mervine, moving against the town, was thrown back in disorder with somewhat serious losses.

Meanwhile, Frémont was acting with a degree of caution highly unusual and on the whole justified by the disastrous consequences of Stockton's more precipitate moves. In October, he did indeed make a brief gesture toward intervening in the conflict. Receiving orders from Stockton to hasten south from the Sacramento, he proceeded as far as Santa Barbara with some one hundred and seventy well-armed men. Here he learned of Mervine's defeat and was informed that the enemy had denuded the country of horses and cattle, so that he would be left without transportation or meat. He concluded that further preparations were necessary, and using, as he wrote Stockton,⁷ "the discretionary authority you have given me," returned to the vicinity of Monterey. Stockton condemned his return in vigorous terms, and censured Frémont in letters to the Secretary of the Navy, a fact which later excited the indignation of the explorer. "I have sometimes wondered," he wrote, "if it never occurred to Stockton that the same difficulties which blocked his march upon Los Angeles were also in the way of my command, which was expected to operate as a mounted force in the interior." He learned at Monterey that he had been made lieutenant-colonel in the army July 10, so he was not strictly subordinate to the Commodore. Certain that he was taking the right course, he continued, with headquarters first

⁷ Frémont, *Memoirs*, I, p. 580.

in Monterey, and later in San Juan, his work of finding good mounts and laying in a store of beeves and other supplies. Receipts were given to friendly inhabitants, while hostile ranchers lost their property without recourse; for this H. H. Bancroft concludes that "the commander cannot be blamed," but some bitter feeling was aroused. Very shortly Frémont had at his back, according to Bryant, 428 "splendid fighters," Kern having sent down the garrison at Sutter's Fort and enlisted Indians in their places, and Grigsby having brought in the Sonoma men.

At the end of November Frémont and this laboriously collected army, with two pieces of artillery, moved out from San Juan, advancing by way of the San Benito River and Salinas Valley toward San Luis Obispo. It was an inclement season. The weather was chilly, and for whole days the men struggled forward through a frigid drizzle; the roads and trails were fetlock deep in mud; the horses found little pasturage, and became so weak for want of nourishment that many fell out by the way. Many of the *caballada* of some five hundred horses and mules which they drove along with them soon had to be left behind. The provisions consisted of necessary foodstuffs carried on pack mules, and a herd of cattle which as fast as they were slaughtered were replaced by others picked up, sometimes a hundred at a swoop, from ranches along the way. Edwin Bryant tells us that thirteen or fourteen large cattle were slaughtered every afternoon, and that the men ate amazing quantities of beef; the average ration seemed to him ten pounds a day, and some consumed much more, rising at two o'clock in the morning to roast fresh slabs of juicy, tender steak. Yet the health of the men continued remarkably good.⁸

At San Luis Obispo, where Frémont posted a strong guard over the mission property to save it from depredation, he was lucky enough to capture Don Jesus Pico, a man of wide influence. After a court-martial had tried him for breaking his parole, and sentenced him to death, Frémont wisely pardoned him—amid the weeping entreaties of his wife and other rela-

⁸ Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, p. 365ff.

tives. Then the march was resumed under continued hardships from wind, cold, and rain. With excessive precaution against an insurgent ambush along the road, Frémont took a rough mountain path far from the sea. Christmas Day found the little army on a high ridge behind Santa Barbara, breasting a bitter southeasterly storm which swept with torrents of water the precipitous slopes of sandstone and clay that they must descend. Undaunted, they set forward, drawing their hats over their eyes and shouting to their beasts. They would have done better to make camp and wait. The wind continued blowing like a tornado, the water falling in sheets, until two o'clock that night. The trail was obliterated and the pack animals, stiffened by the cold and blinded by the rain, constantly lost their footing. Many fell into the deep ravines, where foaming torrents swept over them and drowned them; others slipped over the steep precipice which lay at one side. Before the descent ended more than a hundred horses were lost. The advance guard did not reach the foot of the mountain and find a camping ground till impenetrable darkness had shut down. Then the men dropped exhausted in a sea of mud, and those who tried to light campfires found them almost immediately extinguished. Some, left on the mountainside, crept under shelving rocks and stayed there all night.⁹

After a week's rest at Santa Barbara, where they found most of the houses closed and the streets deserted, the march was resumed, the Battalion now keeping near the shore of the ocean. At times their path was so close that the surf washed their feet, and they could see scores of grampus whales spouting in the offing. On January 5, 1847, in warm, springlike weather, they reached San Buenaventura, and entered a fertile ranching country where provisions were easy to obtain. Six days later, on January 11th, the advance party met two Californians riding bareheaded and in great haste. They brought Frémont news that the California insurgents had met an American army jointly commanded by Kearny and Stockton, and had been

⁹ For a vivid description see Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 380ff.

defeated after hard fighting, the American soldiers then—on the previous day—marching into Los Angeles.

The situation had in fact changed with amazing rapidity. General Stephen W. Kearny had led his Army of the West, comprising some two thousand men, to Santa Fé, had taken possession of that town soon after the middle of August, 1846, and had spent about a month reducing the country to order. He had then set out on September 25th with an expeditionary force of three hundred dragoons for California. On the way he met Kit Carson, hurrying East with official despatches from Stockton and private letters from Frémont, and there ensued an historic interview. Carson told Kearny that the conquest of California was virtually completed. The General thereupon decided to send back all but one hundred of his dragoons, and ordered Carson to turn about and serve as guide for his diminished party. Naturally, Carson protested; he had pledged himself to Commodore Stockton, he said, to go to Washington; moreover, he had already covered eight hundred of the nine hundred and fifty miles from Los Angeles to Santa Fé, and was eager to see his family, from whom he had been so long parted. But Kearny insisted, the scout reluctantly acquiesced, and the despatches were sent on by another hand.

With his hundred dragoons and two mountain howitzers, Kearny reached the frontier of California at the beginning of December, 1846, and at once learned that an insurrection was raging. Commodore Stockton, pent up in San Diego, had sent out Captain Gillespie with a small force of mounted riflemen and a fieldpiece to meet the General. Thus reinforced, on December 6th Kearny with his hundred and sixty officers and men came in contact with a smaller mounted force of the enemy at San Pasqual, about forty miles from San Diego, and in a sharp skirmish was decidedly worsted, with a loss of twenty-one killed or fatally wounded. Kearny's tactics were bad, for he regarded the Californians contemptuously, and failed to move his men forward in a compact, well ordered body; with the result that an advance guard was simply cut to pieces by a

furious charge of the insurgent lancers. The loss of the Californians was trivial. Kearny's shaken and worried force staggered forward next day nine or ten miles to the *rancho* San Bernardo, threatened all the way by the enemy; and here on a hill were brought to bay, the Californians holding the trail in front. The Americans had to subsist on mule-meat and a little muddy water, the wounded suffering intensely. During the night Carson, Edward F. Beale, and an Indian boy heroically slipped through the enemy lines to carry a plea for help to Stockton in San Diego. A relief force was instantly despatched and on the night of December 10th this little body of one hundred and eighty sailors and marines under Lieutenant Gray reached Kearny's hard-pressed detachment, where it frightened the beleaguering Californians from the field.¹⁰

At San Diego, Kearny joined hands with Commodore Stockton, and a joint force was organized. It comprised about fifty-seven of Kearny's original dragoons, sixty of Gillespie's riflemen, some four hundred and thirty of Stockton's sailors and marines, and a number of Indians, California teamsters, and others—about six hundred in all, grouped in four battalions. Stockton had also prepared a battery of six pieces. It is obvious that this little army, designed to coöperate with Frémont, defeat or frighten away General José M. Flores, and capture Los Angeles, was made up chiefly of Stockton's men. It was led jointly by Stockton and Kearny, but Stockton (who thought with much justice that he had saved Kearny's force) took pains to make it clear that he maintained his rank of commander-in-chief and civil governor. Unfortunately, later events showed that Kearny failed to concede the rank. Not far outside Los Angeles occurred the final decisive engagements with the in-

¹⁰ Various descendants and admirers of Kearny have wasted much ink in trying to convert his defeat into a victory; for accurate and impartial accounts of his worsting, see Smith, *War With Mexico*, I, p. 342; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, II, p. 526ff. Sabin's judgment may be accepted as final; "Ethically, it was a victory for the Californians, who had achieved much more than reason could have warranted. The tactics of General Kearny were a blunder."

surgents, on January 8 and 9, 1847, the Americans winning with the loss of only one man killed, and throwing the Californians back to the site of the present city of Pasadena. On the tenth the troops marched into Los Angeles, and Gillespie, commanding one of the battalions, had the satisfaction of raising with his own hands over the government house the flag he had lowered four months earlier. Kearny and Stockton at once took up their headquarters in the town.

There was still some danger of sporadic fighting by the Californians, but Frémont now proved the instrument to avert it. Camping on the afternoon of the twelfth near the mission of San Fernando, he received a message from the commander of the Californians, Don Andres Pico, who intimated that the insurgents were ready to surrender. It would seem that Frémont, who knew that Stockton was at hand and had just defeated the Californian army, should have left his superior to arrange the terms of capitulation. He might have been severely censured by Stockton for arrogating the authority to make a treaty of peace, but it does not appear that the Commodore ever protested. The terms which Frémont granted in this hasty capitulation of Couenga were exceedingly generous. He guaranteed to the insurgents protection in person and property, equal rights with the Americans in the territory, exemption from armed service or from any oath of allegiance during the War, and liberty to leave the country at will; he required only that they lay down their arms, disperse to their homes, and promise to assist in restoring tranquillity and submissiveness among the people. In short, he virtually allowed men who were defeated, hopelessly at bay, and subject even to execution for breaking their parole, to dictate the terms of surrender. It was a characteristically impulsive action, taken probably because Frémont believed the Californians much stronger and bolder than they were.

Yet the terms thus precipitately granted were, on the whole, thoroughly wise; they did much to conciliate the southern Cali-

fornians and to secure their friendship for American rule.¹¹

It is not difficult to imagine the sensations which filled Frémont's mind as on the morning of January 14, 1847, with the capitulation of Couenga in his pocket, he prepared to march into Los Angeles. A heavy rain began falling, amid which the California troops brought in and surrendered to him a brass howitzer which they had captured from Kearny at San Pasqual. Camp was broken, and the men, urging their jaded animals over slippery hills, entered the beautifully verdant plain surrounding the town. At three in the afternoon, the rain still pouring, they were marching down the muddy principal street. A more ragged, ill-provided, unprepossessing battalion it would have been difficult to imagine; they might have been taken, as one of them remarked, for a tribe of Tartar nomads. Their garments tattered, drenched, and plastered with mud; some of them without shoes or hats; their horses dispirited and exhausted—only their military order and arms made them seem soldiers. Yet Frémont had the proud consciousness that California was conquered, that he had played one of the most important rôles in the conquest, and that it was to him that the last hostile force had surrendered. He had the promise of Commodore Stockton that he would be appointed governor, and would thus shortly rule over the territory from which only a few months earlier Castro had ignominiously expelled him.

All seemed well in California; all was well at home. While still in camp at San Juan, the explorer had received through Consul Larkin at Monterey a letter from Jessie. It is worth quoting entire, for it not only provides a budget of news upon events in the Benton household and in Washington generally, but offers an appealing glimpse of Jessie's whole-souled devo-

¹¹ See article by Don Romulo Pico, *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1914. Frémont's whole course in California had been extremely considerate of the natives. At Santa Barbara, Bryant writes (p. 383): "Strict orders were issued by Col. Frémont that the property and the persons of Californians, not found in arms, should be sacredly respected. To prevent all collisions, no soldier was allowed to pass the lines of the camp without special permission, or orders from his officers."

tion. It was dated Washington, June 16, 1846, and began "My Dearest Husband":¹²

A Mr. Magoffin says he will be at Bent's Fort a month from tomorrow, and that he will leave a letter for you, so I write, dearest husband, to tell you how happy I have been made by hearing of you up to the 31st of March, through Mr. O'Larkin. Only the day before, I had received the Mexican account of your being besieged by Gen. Castro, and I was much relieved by what Mr. O'Larkin says—that you could present yourself in Monterey, alone, if you wished, and not be harmed. But I hope that as I write you are rapidly nearing home, and that early in September there will be an end to our anxieties. In your dear letter you tell me that *le bon temps viendra*, and my faith in you is such that I believe it will come: and it will come to all you love, for during your long absence God has been good to us and kept in health your mother and all you love best. This opportunity of writing only presented itself last night, so that there is not time for a letter from your mother herself, but I had one from her two days ago in which she tells me that during the warm weather she will remain at a place about ten miles from the city called Mount Pleasant. Her stay in the country did her health much good last fall and indeed it has been good generally throughout the winter. Her heart has been made glad by your brilliant success, and your late promotion, although it distressed her to anticipate more separations, could not but be most gratifying in many respects. You must let me make you my heartiest congratulations. I am sorry that I could not be the first to call you Colonel. It will please you the more as it was entirely a free will offering of the President's, neither father nor I nor anyone for us having asked or said we would like it.

So your merit has advanced you in eight years from an unknown second lieutenant, to the most talked of and admired lieutenant-colonel in the army. Almost all of the old officers called to congratulate me upon it, the Aberts among them, and I have heard of no envy except from some of the lower order of Whig papers who only see you as Colonel Benton's son-in-law. As for your Report, its popularity astonished even me, your most confirmed and oldest worshipper. Lilly has it read to her (the stories, of course) as a

¹² Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.

reward for good behavior. She asked Preuss the other day if it was true that he caught ants on his hands and eat them—he was so amazed that he could not answer her, and she said, “I read it in papa’s *lepote*; it was when you were lost in California.” Father absolutely idolizes Lilly; she is so good and intelligent that I do not wonder at it. And then you should see his pride in you!

Mother’s health has been worse than ever during the winter, but the force of the disease seems now to have expended itself, and she is quite well again. That gave me a reason for staying at home quietly as I wished, and I have read so much that is improving that you will be very pleased with me. Your mother was kind enough to send me your daguerreotype, and it hangs over the head of my bed and is my guardian angel, for I could not waste time or do anything you did not like with that beloved face looking so kindly and earnestly at me. I opened a new history of Louisiana, a week or two ago, and it commenced with the Spanish discoveries on the southern part of the continent. I was by myself, Lilly asleep, and reading by our lamp. When I came to De Soto’s search for the fountain of youth, I stopped, for it seemed as if pleasant old days had returned; and then I remembered so well what you once wrote to me that I could not help bursting into tears. Do you remember, darling?

It was soon after we were married, and you wrote me, “Fear not for our happiness; if the hope for it is not something wilder than the Spaniards’ search for the fountain in Florida, we will find it yet.” I remembered it word for word, although it was so long since I read it. Dear, dear husband, you do not know how proud and grateful I am that you love me. We have found the fountain of perpetual youth for love, and I believe there are few others who can say so. I try very hard to be worthy of your love.

I had meant to tell you of many things which might interest, but it would take a day to choose out from the year’s accumulation. The road you have discovered is spoken of as giving you more distinction than anything you have yet done. I had to publish almost all your letter, and like everything you write it has been reprinted all over the country. I have some beautiful poetry to show you on our motto *le bon temps viendra*. Editors have written to me for your biography and likeness, but I had no orders from you and then

you know it would look odd to leave out your age, and you never told me how old you were yet.

How old are you? You might tell me now I am a colonel's wife—won't you, old papa? Poor papa, it made tears come to find you had begun to turn gray. You must have suffered much and been very anxious, "but all that must pass." I am very sorry you did not get our letters.¹³ Yours gave so much happiness that I grieved you could not have had as much from ours. You will of course come on here as soon as you get back. I wanted to go to St. Louis to meet you, but father says I had better not, as it will be very uncomfortable and even dangerous to go out in the worst of the season, and I don't want to be sick, for I am not going to let you write anything but your name when you get home. And then we will probably have to be at Jefferson Barracks during the winter and until the new regiment is ready for the field. Father says you are to accept the appointment as it was given, with the understanding that you were to be kept on scientific duty under the direction of the Senate. Mr. Webster says it would be too great a loss to the science of the country if you were stopped in your onward course. If I begin telling you the sincere compliments from people whose names are known in Europe as well as America I would need a day.

You must have a few to think of, however. Edward Everett, Mr. Gallatin, Stevens (Central America), Davis, the author of "Jack Downing," a Dr. Barrett of Connecticut, a botanist who sent me his herbarium of American grasses (for which he wants the buffalo and bunch grasses) are among the Northern men. The South Carolinians claim you bodily, and Dr. Grayson of Charleston wrote one of the most beautiful of all the notices I saw. Your early and steady friends, Mr. McCrady and Mr. Poinsett, were the first to whom I sent well-bound copies of your book. You are ranked with DeFoe. They say that as *Robinson Crusoe* is the most natural and interesting fiction of travel, so Frémont's report is the most romantically truthful. I have a letter from the President of the Royal Geographical Society, Lord Chichester, who says he could not help preparing a paper on your travels to be read at their meeting—and more and more and many more of the same.

Mr. Magoffin has come for the letter and I must stop. I have not

¹³ That is, up to January 24, 1846.

had so much pleasure in a very great while as today. The thought that you may hear from me and know that all are well and that I can tell you again how dearly I love you makes me as happy as I can be while you are away.

All Jacob's relations [the negro servant Jacob Dodson] are well. I see Mrs. Talbot and her daughter constantly. They are so grateful to you for your mention of Theodore.

Farewell, dear, dear husband. In a few months we shall not know what sorrow means. At least, I humbly hope and pray so.

Your own affectionate and devoted wife,

Jessie B. Frémont.

So every one knew that Frémont was now a lieutenant-colonel, and his report had carried his fame throughout the country; Daniel Webster and Lord Chichester had praised him, and the President himself was interested in his promotion. These were facts which, with the knowledge that he would soon be hailed as one of the conquerors of California, must have filled his cup to overflowing.

XX

The Quarrel with Kearny

FRÉMONT was never to drink the cup of triumph or prosperity long, and his life was to prove a dizzy alternation of successes and humiliations. But seldom were the alternations so abrupt and pronounced as in the early months of 1847. From the surrender at Couenga and the exultant entry into Los Angeles it was but a single step to isolation, arrest, and attempted degradation. The civil governor of California was converted within a few weeks into a cashiered officer, facing trial on grave charges; the man who had expected to return east a popular hero was dragged thither by his military superior as a prisoner.

That Frémont was himself in part responsible for this sorry change of fortune is undeniable; but circumstances were also to blame, the mistakes of friends like Stockton were to count, and above all the malice of Stockton's and Frémont's enemy, General Stephen Watts Kearny, was at fault. It was a dark day for the young explorer when this last-named soldier, a life-long army man, a veteran of the War of 1812, a grim martinet, a fighter without any mild or ingratiating qualities whatever, entered California with the rank of brigadier-general in command of the Army of the West.¹ He was a leader of courage, energy, and a certain ability, who had seen thirty years of service on the frontier after his part in the second war with England. Having won his promotion only with plodding slowness, he was not the man to feel sympathetic toward an officer

¹ Thomas Kearny devotes the sixth chapter of his *General Philip Kearny* to an account of the services and exploits of Stephen Watts Kearny, treating him as the just man rendered perfect.

of brilliant parts and swift, spectacular advancement to fame, such as Frémont. His conquest of New Mexico had been one of the more remarkable exploits of the Mexican War. Outfitting 1,660 men at Fort Leavenworth, he had taken barely enough food to reach Santa Fé, confident that he could live on the country—and had done so. In New Mexico he had capably organized a civil government. But he was a stern-tempered soldier who made few friends and many enemies—who has been justly characterized by the most careful historian of the period, Justin H. Smith, as “grasping, jealous, domineering, and harsh.”² Possessing these traits, feeling his pride stung by his defeat at San Pasqual, and anxious to assert his authority, he was no sooner in Los Angeles than he quarreled bitterly with Stockton; and Frémont was not only at once involved in this quarrel, but inherited the whole burden of it as soon as Stockton left the country.

In its essentials, the original dispute was whether Kearny or Stockton should have the chief command in California. The two had hardly met in San Diego, after Kearny was brought into that city by Stockton’s relief force, when this dispute broke out. Stockton later testified that he had made preparations for the march of the joint forces to Los Angeles under the impression that Kearny would go thither as his aide-de-camp, and this was confirmed by a note from Kearny. “It seems however that I was either mistaken in my views, or that General Kearny suddenly altered his mind”; for on the day they left San Diego, December 29th, Kearny gave him to understand that he would like to command the troops in place of Lieutenant Rowan of the *Cyane*, who had been appointed to that post. “I immediately sent for Lieutenant Rowan,” deposed Stockton, “and assembled the officers that were near at hand, and stated to them that General Kearny had volunteered to take command of the troops; that I had appointed him to the command of the troops; but that I retained my own po-

² Smith, *The War with Mexico*, II, p. 264.

sition as commander-in-chief." Stockton continued in his subsequent testimony: ³

I directed my aide-de-camp and the commissary to make a note of what I said on the occasion; the impression made upon my mind was that General Kearny had, for the time being, laid aside his commission of brigadier-general, and had volunteered to serve under my command, and to perform the duties which had been assigned to Lieutenant Rowan as commander of the troops. When the force was paraded, the dragoons were among the troops. With these impressions and views, and considering that I, and I alone, was responsible for the result of the expedition, we commenced our march for the City of the Angels, during which march I performed all the duties which I supposed devolved upon the commander-in-chief of the forces, and, as I supposed, with the hearty acquiescence of General Kearny. General Kearny had repeatedly said he would aid me.... A few days after we commenced the march, I went in advance when the troops arrived at San Bernardo; I made my headquarters a mile and a half or two miles in advance of the camp, and I sent General Kearny to send me the marines and a piece of artillery, which was immediately done. I was in the habit of sending my aide-de-camp to General Kearny to inform him what time I wished to move in the morning, and I always decided upon the route we should take, and where we should camp.

Stockton instanced not only numerous occasions on which he had given orders to Kearny to which the latter submitted, but several occasions on which he had directly countermanded Kearny's orders—once during the fight before Los Angeles—and had been obeyed without the slightest question. When they marched into Los Angeles, Kearny asked him for instructions as to the road. It was Stockton who gave orders for the hoisting of the flag; who directed the quartering of the officers and men. A few days after their arrival, Kearny sent him a letter

³ *Senate Exec. Docs., No. 33, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 191ff.* This volume of testimony in Frémont's court-martial will hereafter be cited simply as *Court-Martial Proceedings*. It runs to 447 pages.

directed to "Commodore Stockton, governor of California and commanding United States forces." Stockton also testified: ⁴

As I have stated, the civil government had been already put into operation; having only been interrupted at Santa Barbara and the City of the Angels; peace having been restored, the civil government in those places went again into operation, and therefore there was nothing for me to do in relation to the establishment of a civil government, except to hand to Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont the commission as governor, which I had pledged my word to do; which I had informed the government I would do, and which would probably have been done, on the 25th day of October, if the insurrection had not broken out. Being desirous to get down on the southern coast of Mexico, I proceeded as rapidly as possible to make the necessary arrangements to leave the Ciudad de los Angeles. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Frémont reported to me his arrival with the other part of the battalion. The position of the parties, and my own position at this time, was, in my judgment and opinion, this: General Kearny had laid aside, for the time being, his commission as brigadier general, and was serving as a volunteer under my command. The troops which were placed, by my orders, under the command of General Kearny, were the dragoons, sailors and marines, and Captain Gillespie's two companies of the California battalion, and no other. On the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Frémont, he reported to me; and I did not give, nor did I intend to give, General Kearny any control or command over that part of the California Battalion. It was under my own immediate command. Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont at this time, was also serving under my command as a volunteer; he having likewise laid aside his commission in the army; and I was recognized in everything up to this time, as far as I know, as their mutual commander-in-chief. Having appointed Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont the governor, I appointed Captain Gillespie to be major of the battalion; and, if I understand the matter before this court, the disobedience of orders charged against the accused, whilst I was the commander-in-chief, is, that he would not obey an order which required him not to recognize my appointment of Captain Gillespie as major of the battalion.

⁴ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 194.

But while Stockton believed that Kearny had acquiesced in this reservation of the chief command, and while there was much evidence that he had actually done so, it shortly appeared that he entirely denied making any such concession. Instead, he held (whether after an initial change of mind or not) that he was the rightful commander-in-chief. With this quarrel smoldering between them, with an active temperamental dislike for one another—for Stockton was generous, warm-hearted, expansive, and impulsive, while Kearny was frigid, grim, and unyieldingly selfish—the two occupied their respective headquarters in Los Angeles. Here they received Frémont on the fourteenth, Stockton friendly and appreciative, Kearny doubtless acid and silent. The explorer had no sooner arrived than Kit Carson hastened to leave Kearny, whom he never liked, and join his old commander. Two days later, Stockton, as he has noted above, on January 16, 1847, issued a proclamation declaring Frémont governor and commander-in-chief in California until the President of the United States should otherwise direct. Kearny, beyond question fuming inwardly but for the moment impotent, immediately left with his dragoons for San Diego; while Stockton made ready to lead his sailors and marines at once to the coast of Mexico, where he hoped they would give a good account of themselves. He was not destined to carry out this plan, however, and soon returned overland to the East.

How was such an unhappy dispute over the chief command in California possible? It could not have arisen but for the vagueness and confusion of the orders sent to Stockton and Kearny from Washington. Each officer had not a little right to feel that the principal authority was in his hands. General Kearny had been instructed by the War Department on June 3, 1846, that "should you conquer and take possession of New Mexico and upper California, or considerable places in either, you will establish temporary civil governments therein." But Stockton had been authorized by orders of the Navy Department on March 14 and 21, May 5, June 24, and October

17, 1845, and June 13 and 15, 1846, to occupy and administer the ports of California—which in effect meant practically all of the province. An additional order of July 12, 1846, reminded him that it was his duty to take and hold all California. "This," he was instructed, "will bring with it the necessity of a civil administration. Such a government should be established under your protection." He was to communicate his instructions to General Kearny when the latter arrived, "and inform him that they have the sanction of the President."⁵ It has been objected that while this order was sent, Stockton did not actually receive it before his departure from California. But the powers which it explicitly conferred had been already conferred by implication in the previous orders, and he had acted on that theory. What wonder that each commander honestly thought that he had the exclusive right to erect and control the new civil government of California?

It was the misfortune of Frémont to be caught in the collision between these two officers; it was his further misfortune to choose the side which subsequent orders from Washington failed to sustain. Little blame can attach to him for this. He might well have felt that the orders which Stockton held were superior to those in Kearny's hands; the order of July 12, 1846, to establish a civil administration "under your protection" was actually a month later in date. Moreover, Kearny's instructions were conditional. "Should you conquer and take possession of . . . upper California," he was told, "you will establish a civil government there." But both Stockton and Frémont took the view, with entire justice, that the conquest of California had been substantially completed before Kearny's arrival; that they had already set up a civil government, which was interrupted but at two points, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, and

⁵ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 412. Stockton deposed that "I was received at San Francisco, and acknowledged to be the governor of the territory and commander-in-chief." He offered written evidence, which the court-martial refused to accept, to show that he was so considered "at the City of the Angels, and that as I began governor, I left there as such."

then but temporarily; and that Kearny had done nothing but get defeated at San Pasqual and require rescuing.

Moreover, Frémont felt a natural and legitimate personal preference for Stockton as his superior. Both headstrong, quick, and fond of action, they were congenial in temperament; they had worked together with little friction for more than six months, and had a high personal regard for each other. Frémont's California Battalion had been organized under Stockton's direct authority, with the explicit understanding that it should act under the Commodore's orders so long as he remained on the coast and needed its services. All its officers save Frémont derived their appointments from Stockton and it was paid by his orders. It was, as Stockton himself wrote later, never in any form mustered into the army, but was exclusively a naval organization. Frémont himself, to be sure, was still in the army, having accepted a Lieutenant-Colonelcy in the "Regiment of Mounted Rifles," but he felt controlled by the fact that he commanded his battalion by authority of Stockton, and that this battalion was attached to the navy. Moreover, he had long believed that the Navy Department under Secretary Bancroft (now resigned) was more efficient, alert, and sympathetic toward him than the War Department. Then and later he suspected, not without reason, that many West Point graduates and older army officers were jealous of his rapid rise. Finally, and very importantly, he kept in mind the fact that Stockton had solemnly promised to make him governor. Kearny also wished to make him governor, and spoke to other officers of his exceptional fitness for the position; but Kearny's promises were less definite.

Altogether, Frémont's course must have seemed perfectly clear to him. Kearny, with his customary Irish assertiveness, lost no time after the three officers had taken their quarters in Los Angeles in trying to establish himself as boss. Before leaving that town for San Diego, he sent a curt note to Stockton, demanding that the Commodore cease all further proceedings relative to the organization of a civil government, and

another curt missive to Frémont, ordering him to make no changes or appointments in the California Battalion without the express sanction of Kearny as his commanding officer. We can imagine Frémont and Stockton conferring in consternation. The peppery Commodore had no intention of taking orders from the man he had rescued from Mexican hands only a few weeks before. He immediately informed the General that a civil government was already in successful operation, that he would do nothing that Kearny demanded, and that he would send the General's note to President Polk and ask for his recall. Kearny, on the next day, January 17, 1847, replied with asperity. He asserted that the credit for conquering the country belonged to the army forces under his command, and declared that it might now for the first time be considered in American possession. "As I am prepared to carry out the President's instructions to me," he added, "which you oppose, I must, for the purpose of preventing a collision between us and possibly a civil war in consequence of it, remain silent for the present, leaving with you the great responsibility of doing that for which you have no authority. . . ." ⁶ Thus the rival commanders of army and navy glowered at each other during their last hours in Los Angeles.

It was in some ways a comic-opera quarrel, but its consequences to Frémont were most serious. That young officer had to make his choice on the morning of January 17th, when Kearny summoned him to the low adobe headquarters, and asked him if he had received the orders of the day before. Frémont with a touch of defiance stated that he had written a reply, which he had left with his clerk to copy. At this moment, Kit Carson entered with the document in question, which Frémont read through and, seizing a pen from Kearny's table, signed. He then seated himself, at Kearny's request, while the latter read the reply. It was a decisive though tactful refusal to obey Kearny's command. Frémont wrote that he believed Commodore Stockton to be the governor and commander-in-

⁶ For these letters see Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 194ff.

chief in California, that he had received a commission from Stockton, and that Stockton was still exercising the functions of civil and military governor. "I feel myself, therefore," he concluded, "with great deference to your professional and personal character, constrained to say that, until you and Commodore Stockton adjust between yourselves the question of rank, where I respectfully think the difficulty belongs, I shall have to report and receive orders, as heretofore, from the Commodore." In all this, Frémont was ill-advised. After all—since he was now back in the army—Kearny was his superior officer; Stockton should have counselled him to obey the General or at least try to reach an agreement with him. But Stockton's influence was evidently exerted in another direction, and Frémont was not politic enough to make terms.

The General, though a man of hot temper and iron will, gave him a full opportunity. Frémont had known something of him in St. Louis, where Kearny had been in command and where he had married a stepdaughter of General William Clark. He had heard the story of how this harsh-featured veteran of the War of 1812 once fell from his horse in front of his parading troops, and, pinned beneath the animal, had imperturbably continued his orders to the advancing men: "Fourth Company, obstacle—March!"⁷ He knew how implacable Kearny could be when aroused. Nevertheless, for the moment, Kearny was patient in his irritation. He told Frémont that he was a much older man and soldier, that he had a warm regard for Senator Benton, who had done him many favors, and a real affection for Jessie, and that he would give the young explorer some honest advice. This advice was to take the letter back and destroy it. Frémont, of course, declined, saying that Stockton would support him; to which Kearny rejoined that Stockton could never support him in disobeying the orders of his superior officer, and that if Frémont persisted, he would ruin

⁷ Fayette Robinson, *Organization of the Army of the United States*, II, p. 130ff.

himself. The two parted stiffly, and from that moment it was war to the knife.

It was on this same day that Frémont received from Stockton the commission dated January 16th, appointing him governor and commander-in-chief of California until the President should otherwise direct.⁸

For the next fortnight, Frémont was regarded almost everywhere in California as the civil governor under Stockton's appointment; and for somewhat more than two months, or until late in March, he was recognized as governor by the people in and about Los Angeles, while Kearny's authority was established farther north. The regular army officers, of course, refused to recognize Frémont, though they were in much perplexity as to who was actually at the head of affairs. A young lieutenant named William Tecumseh Sherman, who had just come out by sea around Cape Horn, tells us that the mess-room query was very frequent, "Who the devil *is* the governor of California?"⁹ Making Los Angeles his capital, Frémont appointed his friend Captain Owens "secretary of state," and began issuing gubernatorial orders in due form. On January 22nd, he posted an official proclamation declaring the restoration of civil authority; and on January 25th, directed Captain S. K. Wilson of the Light Artillery to raise a company of men for "the California service," enlisting them as soon as possible. He purchased an island near the mouth of San Francisco Bay, taking title for the United States and promising a payment of five thousand dollars. His treatment of the people of southern California was conciliatory and kind, and rapidly made them his firm friends.

General Kearny, meanwhile, after a few days in San Diego, departed with a couple of officers in the sloop *Cyane* for Monterey, which he reached on February 8, 1847. Here he met Commodore Shubrick, who had arrived on January 22nd in command of the frigates *Independence* and *Lexington*, and who

⁸ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 38ff.; Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 273.

⁹ W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, I, p. 23.

now supplanted Stockton as chief naval commander. Kearny was rowed over to the *Independence*, wearing an old dragoon coat and army cap, to which he had added a broad visor cut from a full dress hat to shade his face and eyes from the glaring sun.¹⁰ He showed Shubrick his orders; learned of the Navy Department orders dated July 12, 1846, by which the chief naval officer in California was then entrusted with the civil administration of the territory; and was promptly recognized by the Commodore "as head and commander of the troops in California." The two agreed to work together in harmony, ignoring Frémont, and to let the situation rest until further despatches came from Washington.¹¹ Going ashore and establishing his headquarters at Larkin's house, Kearny was pleased to find a strong company of artillery ready waiting for him. In the ensuing weeks, other important bodies of troops arrived from the East. The famous battalion of Mormons, about five hundred strong, which had been recruited in Council Bluffs after that sect had been driven from Nauvoo, reached the territory and made camp at San Luis Rey. A regiment of New York volunteers under Colonel John D. Stevenson came out by sea, and, like the Mormons, were expected in large part to remain as settlers.¹² All these soldiers supported Kearny as governor and refused to have anything to do with Frémont. When Frémont received a curt and chilly letter from Commodore Shubrick, under date of February 13th, showing that Shubrick and Kearny were working in perfect accord, he must have realized that he was left standing alone.

In fact, though he did not know it, all ground for claiming the authority of governor had now been cut from beneath the young explorer's feet by new orders from Washington. These orders, written November 5, 1846, by the Secretary of the Navy, informed both Kearny and Shubrick that the President deemed it best to invest the military commander with the direc-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 24.

¹¹ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 96ff.

¹² Smith, *War with Mexico*, II, p. 219.

tion of land operations and with the civil government, and ordered Shubrick to give General Kearny the entire control over these matters.¹³ This was decisive. It made Kearny governor and commander-in-chief. If the government had only possessed wisdom enough to take this clear step six weeks earlier, it would have prevented the whole dispute. The message reached Kearny in San Francisco on February 12, 1847, and must have been read by Shubrick in Monterey before the fifteenth, or within a month after the original quarrel of Stockton and Kearny. The General had won a swift triumph.

Unfortunately, Kearny made a brutal and hectoring use of his victory. It would have been the part of a gentlemanly officer to inform Frémont at once of the new orders, and to treat him with consideration in his sudden humiliating drop from governor to subordinate. Kearny instead said nothing about them to Frémont. Long afterwards, when he was being cross-examined in Washington on the subject, the following colloquy occurred: ¹⁴

Question: Did you communicate the instructions of the 5th of November, 1846, to Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont?

Answer: I did not. I am not in the habit of communicating to my juniors the instructions I receive from my seniors, unless required to do so in those instructions.

Question: Do you know whether the said instructions were communicated to him by Commodore Shubrick or Commodore Biddle?

Answer: I do not believe that they were; but I know not.

This statement of Kearny's that he was not in the habit of communicating instructions to juniors unless required to do so is a very lame excuse for a base act. Frémont always spoke of the concealment with justified resentment, and believed that it was dictated by a wish to plunge him deeper in seeming disobedience to the government. Nor was Kearny less domineering in other regards.

¹³ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

The painful events which followed and led up to Frémont's departure for the East as a virtual prisoner of General Kearny's make an unhappy chronicle. Kearny and Shubrick, at the beginning of March, issued a joint announcement of the President's orders; and the same day Kearny published a proclamation in which he formally assumed the governorship. According to Kearny, a copy of the joint announcement was sent to Frémont, but there is no evidence that he received it. What is certain is that Kearny transmitted to him a curt order to bring to Monterey, as the territorial capital, all archives and public documents pertaining to the government, and to surrender them. Kearny added that he had directions from General Winfield Scott, which he enclosed, not to detain the explorer in California against his wishes a moment longer than the necessities of the service might require. Once he had complied with Kearny's instructions regarding the papers, and had obeyed the General's further orders that he muster his men into the United States service, so that they might be discharged and paid, he could depart. Naturally, but very unwisely, Frémont refused to obey this demand for the papers. He declared later that he knew nothing of the government orders of November 5th, and believed that Kearny was trying by bluster and threats to depose him from the governorship.¹⁵

Kearny simultaneously placed Lieutenant-Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, with the Mormon Battalion, at San Luis Rey, in command of the southern half of California. When Cooke sent a courier to Los Angeles to inquire of Frémont how many of the California Battalion had entered the United States service, he received little satisfaction:¹⁶ "The answer was by a 'governor,' through his 'secretary of state,' that none had consented to enter the public service; but as rumors of insurrection were rife, it was not deemed safe to disband them."

If Kearny's object were to entrap Frémont into defiance of duly constituted authority, he had now succeeded. And cer-

¹⁵ Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 288.

¹⁶ Cooke, *The Conquest of New Mexico and California*, pp. 286, 287.

tainly the General's tactics were as arrogant and hostile as possible. In his proclamation, he included a direct slap at Frémont by saying that "there is no doubt that some excesses, some unauthorized acts, were committed by persons in the service of the United States." He cast public contempt upon the certificates which Stockton and Frémont had given in payment for property and services, saying they were almost worthless. Once when a merchant showed him Frémont's certificate for a considerable sum, inquiring as to its value, Kearny looked at it, and asked a bystander for a quarter of a dollar. When the man gave him half a dollar, Kearny replied: "That's too much; a quarter-dollar is its value."¹⁷ Rumors arose that Kearny considered Frémont a mutineer and was preparing a condign punishment for the young explorer; and old-line army men who had resented Frémont's rapid advancement gave the rumors general currency. Some of them loudly declared that the mutinous officer deserved the death penalty!

All this unquestionably threw Frémont into intense anxiety; and at the same time, he became worried by the growing unrest of the Californians about Los Angeles. It is difficult to determine just how great this unrest was. We can hardly believe that even the febrile young bloods and irresponsible loafers of the region, only two months after being soundly thrashed, with overwhelming American forces on the scene, would think of a revolt. They would simply be putting their necks inside a halter. But Frémont was excited; he was full of resentment against Kearny, and all too ready to believe that Kearny's displacement of him would cause all kinds of trouble. He had plumed himself upon the tranquillity and good-will of the citizens of southern California under his sway. "I lived in the midst of the people in their ancient capital," he later boasted, "administering the government, as a governor lives in the capital of any of our States." The security of life, limb and property seemed as complete as in New England; travelers on lonely trails, dwellers on isolated ranches, were perfectly safe; and

¹⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., Appendix, p. 995.

Frémont himself, sending his Battalion out to the San Gabriel Mission only nine miles away, lived almost without guard. Now, in his overwrought frame of mind, he thought that the popular temper was rapidly changing.

No doubt it really was. Little bands of armed Mexicans were galloping about the country, and news came in of men armed to the teeth patrolling the roads. Most of the Californians seemed uneasy, and rumors flew about that a bloody uprising was at hand. Frémont was at no loss to lay the blame directly upon Kearny. The discontent arose—he thought—because the Mormon troops under Cooke had been marched from San Diego toward Los Angeles, and the Californians hated and feared the Mormons; because Kearny's proclamation had annulled some of the mild and wise provisions of the Capitulation of Couenga; and because of rumors that after Frémont had been forcibly deposed, a much harsher officer would be installed in his place. Still more important was the money consideration involved in the reports that Kearny's policy opposed any payment for the cattle, horses, and goods taken, and the property destroyed, in the conquest. The antagonism of many native Californians had suddenly been re-aroused, and the explorer thought it greater than it was.¹⁸

Money considerations were indeed now important, for in the fifty days of his dubious governorship Frémont repeatedly borrowed large sums. He obtained a loan of \$2,000 from Don Antonio José Cos on February 4, 1847, and of \$1,000 more on February 20; he borrowed \$2,500 from Eulogio de Celis on March 3rd; and on March 18th he obtained \$15,000 from F. Huttman for drafts on the government, allowing a premium of \$4,500—that is, giving Huttman drafts for \$19,500 in all. Secretary Buchanan refused to honor the drafts, and they were protested, this leading ultimately (as we shall see) to Frémont's arrest in London. These loans variously bore interest at 2 or

¹⁸ H. H. Bancroft makes light of the threatened uprising, but adds: "It is true, however, that the Missouri volunteers had succeeded in arousing some feeling against the Mormons." *History of California*, V, p. 442.

3 per cent a month. Frémont also gave Celis a certificate or receipt for the delivery of 600 beef-cattle for the army, pledging the United States to pay \$6,975 for them. These cattle never went to the California Battalion, but were instead delivered to Abel Stearns, to be held for breeding. Celis later declared that Frémont, "not having time to consume said cattle on account of having received a superior order to deliver up the command and disband the force, ordered said cattle to be delivered to Mr. Abel Stearns, as I understand, in the quality of a deposit, until the government should dispose of them." Frémont himself explained that he put the cattle in private hands to secure himself if the government should fail to acknowledge the debt. This seems reasonable, but it does not offer a complete explanation of his certificate of delivery for the army. It is clear that he was getting into deep water financially, and had reason to become apprehensive.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, he determined upon a characteristically rash, theatrical, and arduous enterprise—a ride night and day to Monterey to "warn" Kearny of the danger of an outbreak. It was not necessary for him to go in person; and had there really been danger, his duty would have been to stay vigilantly with his Battalion in Los Angeles. He knew this perfectly well. The chief reason for the ride, beyond doubt, was that he wished to find out in person his real status. Another reason very likely lay in his worry over the possibility that Kearny would influence the government against paying the heavy debts he had incurred.

At any rate, the effort was a feat which may well be compared with such other famous rides of history as Burnaby's to Khiva. Accompanied only by Don Jesus Pico and the faithful black servant, Jacob Dodson, Frémont set off at daybreak on what was to be a round trip of eight hundred and forty miles in eight days. They took three horses apiece, or nine in all; the loose mounts, or six extra horses, as was customary on such

¹⁹ On these financial claims see Bancroft, *op. cit.*, V, pp. 435, 462ff.; Cardinal Goodwin, *Establishment of State Government in California*, pp. 35-38.

expeditions, were driven ahead, and every twenty miles or so, as a fresh steed was wanted, one was lassoed and saddled. At a sweeping gallop they covered 120 miles the first day, March 22, 1847, sleeping at a ranch beyond Santa Barbara. The following day they traversed 135 miles, reaching the old home of Don Jesus at San Luis Obispo, where they made a complete change of horses. They rode some seventy miles the third day, and slept in a cañon of the Salinas where, after midnight, they were awakened by prowling bears; at dawn they were off again, and in mid-afternoon, after traveling ninety miles, were at Kearny's headquarters in Monterey. The trip back again, after a day for a conference with the General, was made with equal rapidity. Frémont had covered a distance almost equal to that from New York to Chicago, over rough ground, in seventy-six actual riding hours, an exploit which merited the wide attention it later obtained.²⁰

If he had hoped to improve his relations with Kearny by the interview, that hope was quickly dashed. He was received, he later declared, with every token of disrespect and discourtesy; and certainly a stormy scene ensued. The explorer entered alone at ten in the morning, though Larkin accompanied him to the door; he found that Kearny had with him Colonel Richard B. Mason, an able army officer, and that both men were stiff and hostile. Frémont asked if he could not be left in private with the General, and when Kearny refused to dismiss Mason, the young officer blazed up with the words: "Did you bring him to spy upon me?"²¹ This ended all hope of courteous relations. From Larkin in Monterey Frémont had apparently for the first time received definite information of the orders of November 5th, though it is difficult to believe that he did not know of their nature soon after March 1st. Larkin, a shrewd, frank man, had perhaps advised him overnight to yield to Kearny. At any rate, Frémont now offered his resignation, which Kearny refused. The General instead de-

²⁰ Dellenbaugh, *Frémont and '49*, p. 375ff.

²¹ *Congressional Globe*, *ut supra*, p. 1000.

manded whether Frémont would obey his orders of March 1st, and when the Lieutenant-Colonel hesitated, bade him reflect well, for his answer would be very important; if he wanted an hour for consideration, to take it; if a day, to take that. Frémont departed, and in about an hour returned and said that he would obey.²²

The position of the deposed governor was now humiliating, and old-line officers of the regular army seem to have missed few opportunities to lacerate his feelings. His attitude was no doubt provocative. The hot-tempered accusation that Kearny was employing Mason as a spy was probably all too typical of Frémont in those days. Yet there can be no question that he was treated badly. He was sent back to Los Angeles, with orders to wind up the affairs of the California Battalion there and to surrender the public property. Colonel Mason, intensely prejudiced against Frémont, was sent after him, to have full charge over the southern district. Between these two men promptly occurred a series of clashes. Mason, experienced, practical, of stern and even harsh character, had an instinctive dislike for the impulsive, impractical explorer. Their collisions culminated in an angry scene in which Mason exclaimed, "None of your insolence, or I will put you in irons!" and in a challenge by Frémont to a duel, which Mason accepted.²³ General Kearny had to take decisive measures to prevent this encounter from occurring. It must be said that the challenge did Frémont anything but credit, and that Mason showed somewhat more cool sense and prudence than he in the matter. The explorer would have been wise to avoid any display of animosity, repress his explosive tendencies, do his work well, and conciliate his superiors. But the evidence seems clear that Mason hectoring him and putting needless indignities upon him in the presence of other officers.

Kearny had already made up his mind to take Frémont back East, and there place him under arrest for mutiny and insubor-

²² *Court-Martial Proceedings*, p. 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 142ff.

dination. For this reason, he brusquely refused Frémont's request, made in Los Angeles on May 10, 1847, that he be allowed to take sixty men and 129 horses which he had in readiness, and join his regiment under General Winfield Scott in Mexico. Later the young officer counted this refusal a gross injustice, for it contravened orders given by Scott himself. An equally peremptory "no" was given to Frémont's suggestion that he be allowed to return direct to the United States with his own original exploring party, at his own expense, instead of with Kearny's command. He was, in fact, now virtually a prisoner. How far Kearny's attitude fell short of the generosity and consideration which the War Department expected him to display will be evident from a reading of the instructions which Secretary of War Marcy had transmitted him under date of June 11, 1847:

When the dispatch from this department was sent out in November last, there was reason to believe that Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont would desire to return to the United States, and you were then directed to conform to his wishes in that respect. It is not now proposed to change that direction. But since that time it has become known here that he bore a conspicuous part in the conquest of California; that his services have been very valuable in that country, and doubtless will continue to be so should he remain there.

Impressed, as all engaged in the public service must be, with the great importance of harmony and cordial coöperation in carrying on military operations in a country so distant from the seat of authority, the President is persuaded that, when his definite instructions were received, all questions of difficulty were settled, and all feelings which have been elicited by the agitation of them have subsided.

Should Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont, who has the option to return or remain, adopt the latter alternative, the President does not doubt you will employ him in such a manner as will render his services most available to the public interest, having reference to his extensive acquaintance with the inhabitants of California, and his knowledge of their language, qualifications, independent of others, which it is supposed may be very useful in the present and prospective state of our affairs in that country.

But Kearny, far from acting in any such spirit, chose to push his charges against the explorer to the bitter end. The volunteers of the California Battalion, refusing to be mustered into service with poor pay, were discharged in a bitter frame of mind with no pay at all.²⁴ Left with a fragment of the loyal company which had entered California with him, only nineteen men in all, Frémont was compelled to trail eastward at the chariot-wheels of the General. All this, as he later put it, was "aggravated by a succession of indignities, commencing with a public exhibition and public insults before the assembled inhabitants and officers of the navy, at Monterey, on the Pacific, and receiving their crowning accumulation of affronts at Fort Leavenworth, on the Missouri."

In fact, the gossip of army circles and the settlers' campfires at the time was that Kearny intended the severest penalties for Frémont. Young W. T. Sherman heard some officers declare that the explorer would be shot; others, that he would be carried back home in irons. It may be mentioned that Sherman rode out to his tent to see him near Monterey, and took tea "without being much impressed by him." Kearny plainly told Frémont that many of the claims he had incurred in the name of the government would not be allowed, and would have to be met from his own pocket.²⁵ Thus the inglorious episode drew to its end. In June, the explorer joined Kearny in camp near the Sacramento, and about the middle of that month they set out on the long transcontinental journey by way of Fort Hall. Frémont was compelled by the General to leave behind him at San Francisco all his geological and botanical specimens; he had also to abandon his much-used scientific instruments; and he was not allowed to bring back with him Kern, the artist of the expedition, with his sketches and outline maps.²⁶

Throughout the trip home the two parties, animated by

²⁴ Smith, *op. cit.*, II, p. 218.

²⁵ W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, I, p. 27; Captain Aram's story, *New York Herald*, October 1, 1856.

²⁶ Compare John T. Hughes, *Doniphan's Expedition*, Ch. 15.

mutual antagonism, had nothing but a formal intercourse; Kearny instructing Frémont to keep his men at a specified distance in the rear of his own Mormon escort. Once or twice, he roughly ordered Frémont to change his place of encampment. They passed on their way the camp of the Donner party, where so many had tragically perished, and Frémont paused to destroy all traces which might operate to the discouragement of emigrants, burning the broken wagons, ox-yokes, and other sad relics. On the Big Sandy River the two parties met a body of Western emigrants. Kearny with characteristic haughtiness stood on his dignity, merely inviting the settlers to come and see him—none of them doing so. But Frémont visited the emigrants' camp and spent the evening, giving them much valuable advice upon what they should do to cross the Sierras safely before winter set in. He urged them to press on without delay. Some seventy years later one of these emigrants recalled how offish and insolent they considered Kearny, and how much they liked Frémont.²⁷ On the day that the two military parties reached Fort Leavenworth, late in August, Kearny sent for the young Lieutenant-Colonel to come to him at the office of the commandant. There he was seated and a lieutenant read an order, directing him to give up his command, arrange his accounts, consider himself under arrest, and proceed to Washington to report.

The long ordeal was ended, and Frémont, free at last from the daily humiliation of Kearny's direct control, turned his face toward St. Louis with relief. Considering himself one of the chief figures in the conquest of California, the victim in recent months of adverse circumstances and military jealousy, he felt sure of vindication. As he and his friends reached Kansas Landing, the wide muddy river stretching away in the August haze below them, they saw a boat putting in at the

²⁷ Charles L. Camp, "William Alexander Trubody and the Overland Pioneers of 1847," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVI (1937), pp. 122-143. One emigrant, James Eastin, was a southern Democrat who liked Frémont so much that in 1856 he had difficulty in deciding whether or not to vote for him on the Republican ticket.

log wharf. Pushing through the crowd of roustabouts, loafers, and half-bewildered emigrants toward the gangplank, Frémont heard a choking cry—and Jessie ran into his arms.²⁸ She had come up from St. Louis to meet him. The joy of the reunion, after more than two years, may be imagined; and it was but the beginning of a reception which quickly became something of an ovation. Kearny, grim and taciturn, preceded Frémont down the river, and extended and exaggerated reports of their dispute had flown in advance of both. But public sympathy naturally inclined toward the young officer who had made so dashing a record in the West, and with whose family St. Louis had so many and such close ties. The river towns cheered him. St. Louis received him with acclamations; the leading citizens hastened to call upon him, and tendered him an invitation to a great public dinner, which he, of course, felt it necessary to decline. He did, however, make a brief speech to the crowd which surged about him on his arrival, reviewing and defending his course in California.

To his friends, who did not wait to hear the adverse evidence, the case was already clear. Frémont, like Columbus, they said, had returned from the discovery and conquest of a New World beyond the Rockies a prisoner and in disgrace.

²⁸ St. Louis correspondence, New York *Herald*, September 6, 1847.

XXI

A Famous Court-Martial

THE Benton family had been ready to take up arms the moment it had first heard of the clash between Frémont and Kearny. On June 7, 1847, the precise, methodical President Polk, having finished his morning's work at his desk and risen from his lunch, told the secretaries at one o'clock to open the doors of his public office. Among the first callers, richly dressed, was Jessie Frémont, and with her the short, sturdy figure of Kit Carson, weather-beaten, swarthy from the southwestern sun, and awkward in his soot-black new broadcloth. The famous scout had made the overland trip from the Pacific Coast in a little more than three months, and brought the Los Angeles news of February 25th with him. He was enjoying the hospitality of the Benton home in Washington, where his modesty and gentleness had already won him the warmest regard. Polk greeted the pair cordially.

Kit Carson, Jessie told the President, had been waiting several days for an opportunity to talk with him and tender his services as despatch-bearer to California. Carson then came forward and delivered Polk a long letter from Frémont, which had been addressed originally to Benton, and which Benton had sent on from St. Louis. It related in part to the quarrel over the governorship:

Mrs. Frémont seemed anxious [wrote the tactful Polk in his diary] to elicit from me some expression of approbation for her husband's conduct, but I evaded [making any]. In truth, I consider that Colonel Frémont was greatly in the wrong when he refused to obey the orders issued to him by General Kearny. I think General Kearny was right also in his controversy with Commodore Stockton.

It was unnecessary, however, that I should say so to Colonel Frémont's wife, and I evaded giving her an answer.

At the Cabinet meeting next day the members agreed that Kearny had been in the right, Stockton and Frémont in the wrong. But Polk hoped the quarrel would blow over. Just a week later, Jessie called again with Kit Carson. This time she expressed a wish that her husband might be kept in California. The President told her that Carson would be given orders to Kearny leaving it to Frémont's option to stay on the Pacific Coast, or to return east and join his regiment, the Mounted Rifles, then in Mexico.

All this was a prelude to a much more serious attempt to enlist Polk against General Kearny. On August 17, 1847, as the hour for a Cabinet meeting approached, Senator Benton was ushered in at the White House. He was just back from the West, and Polk gladly took time to talk to him: ¹

He remarked that he had some time ago addressed a letter to the adjutant-general [relates Polk in his diary] demanding that Colonel Frémont should be recalled and a court of inquiry organized in his case, as due to the Colonel's honor and military character. I replied that I had read his communication, but that it had not been deemed necessary to take any action upon it. I told him that there had been some difficulty between the officers in California, which I much regretted, and that I had hoped it might not be necessary to institute any trial by court-martial. I also made a general remark to the effect that I had not deemed it necessary to do so. General Benton to this remarked in substance, I am glad to hear from you, sir, as President of the United States, that there has been nothing in Colonel Frémont's conduct which requires a court-martial in his case. I instantly said to him that he must not understand me as expressing any opinion in reference to the difficulty which had arisen between Colonel Frémont, General Kearny, and Commodore Stockton in California; but what I meant to say was that I hoped that the difficulty upon the arrival of the instructions of the 5th of November last had been settled, and that it might not be necessary to institute proceedings by a court-

¹ M. M. Quaife, ed., *Diary of James K. Polk*, III, p. 120ff.

martial in reference to the matter, and that I desired to avoid doing so if it could be done. To this General Benton said there was of course no commitment on my part....

Benton thereupon added that he should introduce a resolution in the Senate calling for a full investigation of California affairs; and when Polk told him with some stiffness that the Administration had nothing to fear from the most searching inquiry, he explained that he did not mean to bother the Administration, but merely wished a broader investigation for Frémont's sake than the technical and limited procedure of a court-martial would allow. "He was evidently much excited," wrote Polk, "but suppressed his feelings and talked in a calm tone."

Benton's heat in the matter sprang from something more than his native irascibility and intense family loyalty; he was prone to imagine conspiracies, and believed that Kearny's army friends had banded together to destroy Frémont by malicious newspaper stories.² Unquestionably, one agent of Kearny's, Lieutenant W. H. Emory, whom the General had sent to Washington by way of Panama with despatches at about the same time that Frémont had sent Kit Carson overland, had spread partisan and ill-natured reports. Emory, who seems never to have been highly accurate in his statements, shared the usual disdain of regular army officers for Frémont.³ He had no sooner reached Panama on his way east than he wrote a long letter attacking Stockton and Frémont. This appeared in the New York *Courier and Enquirer* of April 23, 1847. He seems to have furnished the material for prejudiced and misleading articles in the New Orleans *Picayune* of April 22nd and 27th, the Louisville *Journal* of May 1st, and the St. Louis *Republican* of May 4th, 1847. Benton believed that Lieutenant-Colonel Philip St. George Cooke of the Mormon Battalion was guilty of complicity in this defamatory campaign, which he ascribed

² See Benton's statement, *Congressional Globe*, 1st Sess., Appendix, p. 1019.

³ Compare W. H. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance from Fort Leavenworth . . . to San Diego* (1848).

to jealousy; and there is no doubt that Cooke seldom lost an opportunity to speak slightly of the explorer.⁴ The effect upon Jessie of the sudden avalanche of press attacks was later bitterly described by Benton to the Senate:

There was a wife—young and sensitive—to whom the light of heaven became hateful, and darkness terrible, and society intolerable—who fled two thousand miles, to meet in the wilderness the “mutineer in irons,” as some gave it out—a young wife, tranquil in the day, when people looked upon her—convulsed and frantic in the night when left to her own agonies—the heart bursting, the brain burning, the body shivering; and I, her father, often called, not to witness, but to calm, this terrible agitation—and these publications the cause of all.

Benton swore vengeance, and his demands made the court-martial unescapable. When aroused he was a bitter, implacable foe, and he was a great national power whom even Polk had reason to conciliate. By late summer the stage was all set. Kit Carson had left Washington, and braving the difficult trip to Santa Fé, was far in the Southwest again. Frémont and Jessie, after their joyous reunion at Kansas Landing, had lingered in St. Louis at the Brants’ only a few days, and then had hurried on by way of Blue Lick, Kentucky, where Mrs. Benton was staying at one of the Senator’s farms to recruit her health, to Washington; every stage in their journey chronicled in the newspapers.⁵ Kearny had preceded them. Alarmed by the Senator’s anger and the growing storm, he stayed with his family in St. Louis only four days, and was in New York, getting ready for the trial, on September 10, 1847.⁶

Army groups and political circles felt that a *cause célèbre* was about to begin. It divided attention with even the final battles of Scott’s army before Mexico City—Molino del Rey on September 8th and Chapultepec on September 13th. Its possible

⁴ Compare Philip St. George Cooke, *The Conquest of New Mexico and California*, p. 286ff.

⁵ St. Louis *Weekly Reveillé*, September 20, 1847.

⁶ New York *Herald*, September 11, 1847.

effect on Benton's loyalty to Polk and on Democratic strength was eagerly discussed. Already it was evident that public sympathy, with its natural leaning toward a dashing, picturesque young hero and a man under heavy and ill-explained attack, inclined toward Frémont. Benton was all confidence. "We shall demolish him (Kearny) with all ease, and overwhelm him with disgrace," he wrote on October 7th. And a little later he reassured Frémont: "You may be at ease. The enemy is now in our hands, and may the Lord have mercy on them; for I feel as if I could not."

The explorer was soon busy, together with Benton and his brother-in-law, William Carey Jones, preparing his defense. On first reaching Washington he had been called south by the last illness of his mother in Aiken, South Carolina; but she died before he arrived, and he could only accompany her body to Charleston, where she was buried. Before leaving the capital he wrote the Adjutant-General, requesting that he be given a trial as soon as the necessary witnesses could be assembled in Washington. He would have preferred, he said, to wait for Stockton and for leading citizens of California who were ready to testify in his behalf; but he was so eager for a speedy vindication that he would ask only a month to bring certain witnesses from Missouri. A larger reason than his mere desire for personal justification, he added, called for the court-martial.⁷ The accusations against him covered the whole field of his operations in California, both civil and military, from his first arrival in 1846. The testimony before the court would therefore be a history of the conquest of California and an explanation of the policy he had pursued there. Being a military subordinate, he could make no report, but the trial would serve as a substitute, throwing light on the conduct of all the American officers, and indicating the proper policy to be pursued toward native Californians, American settlers, and Indians.

Polk's diary shows that he and his advisers were deeply concerned, and the court-martial was the principal business

⁷ Bigelow, *Frémont*, p. 217ff.

considered at the Cabinet meeting of September 18, 1847. It shows also that the choleric Benton was, as various newspapers asserted, really injuring his son-in-law by excess of zeal.⁸ Benton called at the White House for a long chat one evening late in October, a fortnight before the court-martial, and could talk of little but Frémont's virtues and Kearny's malignity. Seated in front of the fire, he declared with vehement gestures that the deepest concern of his life was to see justice done the young explorer. If the inquiry were not full and complete, he threatened, he would have four other officers court-martialed—Kearny, and the impudent young men of Kearny's entourage, W. H. Emory, Captain H. S. Turner, and St. George Cooke. His excitement was painfully evident, and Polk, who listened attentively, was careful to say as little as possible. The President, in fact, was becoming a little sour toward the Benton family.⁹

A day or two after this call, Polk was treated with great rudeness by Benton's son Randolph, who strode in to ask for a lieutenancy at the front, grew impatient and impudent when Polk said that commissions went by merit and not by favor, and swore audibly as he flung himself out of the door. The Senator was meanwhile bombarding the Secretary of War with requests and demands regarding the trial, some of which were inadmissible; and as the month closed, it was necessary to give most of two more Cabinet meetings to their consideration. "Benton," sighed the harassed President, "is a man of violent passions." Well realizing that he was likely to make the Senator an enemy of his administration, Polk was resolved that the explorer should be tried without favor or privilege:¹⁰

⁸ Compare St. Louis *Republican*, August 27th; St. Louis *Weekly Reveillé*, September 13, 1847.

⁹ Polk, *Diary*, III, pp. 176, 177. It is interesting to note that Polk had wished to have Benton made lieutenant-general in supreme command during the Mexican War, a plan defeated in the Senate after the necessary legislation had passed the House. Benton later declined appointment as major-general to serve in Mexico. W. M. Meigs, *Life of Benton*, p. 363ff.

¹⁰ Polk, *Diary*, III, pp. 202-205.

I know of no reason why this case should produce more interest or excitement than the trial of any other officer charged with a military offense, and yet it is manifest that Senator Benton is resolved to make it so. I think he is pursuing a mistaken policy so far as Col. Frémont is concerned, but that is an affair of which he must judge. I will do my duty in the case, without fear or affection.

Thus the trial came on. It was superb Indian summer weather. Pennsylvania Avenue was lively with carriages and fashionably dressed promenaders. The hotels were awakening from their summer sleep to welcome the first politicians arriving in preparation for Congress; Douglas of Illinois, the "little giant," was at Coleman's; Clingman of North Carolina at Brown's; Bishop Polk of Louisiana at Gadsby's. A corps of Indians who happened to be in town divided attention with the dozens of army officers who had arrived to be witnesses or spectators at the court-martial.¹¹ Headlines on the front pages of the Washington and New York dailies dealt with what was considered the most dramatic army trial since the court-martial of General Wilkinson thirty years before. At twelve o'clock noon on November 2, 1847, the panel of thirteen officers, carried to the arsenal in Washington by a special omnibus, was called to order by Brevet Brigadier-General G. M. Brooke, of the Fifth Infantry.

Each side had its body of retainers and witnesses who glowered at one another, while the principals surprised the reporters by sitting as cool as cucumbers. Especial notice was attracted by Frémont's "desert rangers and mountain scalers," including his veteran scout Alexis Godey, his faithful aide Dick Owens, the trapper Thomas Williams, and Risdon Moore, the Illinoisan of his party who had disagreed with him regarding his early California operations, but who after a night in jail had become a whole-hearted adherent. Kearny and his associates, among them the Captain H. S. Turner whom Benton had named as a special object of his wrath, blazed with gold lace. The General

¹¹ New York *Herald*, November 4, 5, 1847.

looked solemn, stern, and inflexible, while Frémont, sitting at a side table with the Senator, "appeared as if writing at his camp in the mountains." Benton, calmly self-possessed, watched every step in the proceedings like a hawk.¹²

At the outset, the explorer announced that he would make no use of technical or legal points of defense, would raise no artificial objections, and would do all that he could do to expedite the trial. The three essential charges were of mutiny from January 17, to May 9, 1847; disobedience of the lawful commands of a superior officer; and conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline. Frémont declared that he considered the whole affair to be a comedy of three errors: "first, in the faulty order sent out from this place; next, in the unjustifiable pretensions of Gen. Kearny; thirdly, in the conduct of the government in sustaining these pretensions, and the last of these errors I consider the greatest of the three." Kearny would have preferred to rest his case upon the worst charge alone—mutiny.¹³ His blood was now up, and he shortly angered Frémont and Benton by making an accusation which touched the personal honor of the former as nothing else had done.

This was the accusation that Frémont, when summoned to acknowledge the authority of Kearny instead of Stockton, attempted to drive a bargain regarding the civil governorship of California. The effort to sell himself to the highest bidder, said Kearny, took place in the General's headquarters at Los Angeles on January 17th.

He asked me if I would appoint him governor. I told him I expected shortly to leave California for Missouri; that I had, previous to leaving Santa Fé, asked for permission to do so, and was in hopes of receiving it; that as soon as the country was quieted I should, most probably, organize a civil government in California; and that I, at that time, knew of no objections to my appointing him as the governor. He then stated that he would see Commodore Stockton,

¹² Washington *National Intelligencer*, November 3-7, 1847; New York *Herald*, November 6, 1847.

¹³ Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, p. 716.

and that, unless he appointed him governor at once, he would not obey his orders, and left me.

This charge Frémont indignantly denied. It was essentially a charge that he had a corrupt motive, and he repudiated it angrily. Never in his life, he said, had he either begged or bargained for any office, though three Presidents, Jackson, Tyler, and Polk, had given him appointments.¹⁴

Unquestionably we may accept Frémont's denial, for while he was frequently hot-headed, he was never base. Kearny, as Frémont and Benton had no difficulty in showing, was an unreliable witness, whose memory in other particulars was highly untrustworthy. At the same time, it is almost certain that some mention of the governorship had been made in the conversation between Kearny and Frémont. Frémont actually received from Stockton a commission as governor bearing date of January 17, the day in question. A fortnight later, in a private letter to Benton, he wrote that "both [Kearny and Stockton] offered me the commission and post of governor; Commodore Stockton, to redeem his pledge to that effect, immediately, and General Kearny offering to give the commission in four or six weeks." This was unquestionably true. Kit Carson tells us that Kearny had spoken repeatedly, in his journey from Santa Fé to California, of his intention of making Frémont governor.¹⁵ It is altogether likely that the explorer, with his usual frankness, told Kearny that he wished to be civil governor and that Stockton had promised him the place; it is altogether likely that Kearny, in reply, said that if the young man would be patient, would accept his authority, and would wait three or four weeks, he would himself make the appointment. Kearny's error lay in giving this conversation a sinister interpretation.

¹⁴ *Court-Martial Proceedings*, pp. 380, 392ff.

¹⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., *Appendix*, p. 978. W. H. Russell told the court-martial that Kearny had expressed this intention: "I only remember distinctly that he spoke of his intention of appointing Colonel Frémont governor." *Proceedings*, p. 263.

The court-martial dragged slowly forward, in the formal, punctilious fashion of army trials. Public interest for a time remained surprisingly intense. James Gordon Bennett's New York *Herald*, which had a truly national circulation, published two columns regarding the case on November 7, 1847; one column the following day; gave it almost the entire first page on November 9th; and throughout the remainder of the month allotted it from one-eighth to two and a half columns daily. Everywhere in the West and South the press took up the trial at great length. It advertised Frémont to the American public as never before, and on the whole the testimony presented him in a favorable light. Nobody could read the evidence and blame his insubordination in very severe terms. The oldest officers of the army, as members of the court later admitted, would have been puzzled to decide the relative rank and rights of the Commodore and the General. He was the victim of a dispute between them, a dispute not of his own making. For another consideration, insubordination was not rated a grave offense by the individualistic Americans of 1847. Finally, the trial wrote indelibly into the public mind the fact that he had played an early, daring, and important part in the events which gave California to the nation.

Frémont and his counsel made it clear that his refusal to obey Kearny had been based upon the broadest possible foundation, Stockton's constructive right to set up a civil government following conquest. They needed only to quote his letter to Shubrick at the time (February 7, 1847); a letter in which he declared that Kearny had come out with instructions designed for a still unconquered country, and had instead found one fully conquered, to which these instructions clearly did not apply:

The conquest of California was undertaken and completed by the joint effort of Commodore Stockton and myself, in obedience to what we regarded paramount duties from us to our government; that done, the next necessary step was the organization of a civil government, designed to maintain the conquest by the exercise of mild and

wholesome civil restraints over the people, rather than by the iron rule of military force.

The result of our labors, which were precisely what was contemplated by the instructions of General Kearny, were promptly communicated to the Executive of the Union by an express, which has not yet brought back the approval or disapproval of the government. General Kearny's instructions being, therefore, to the letter fully anticipated by others, I did not feel myself at liberty to yield a position so important to the interests of my country until, after a full understanding of all the grounds, it should be the pleasure of my government that I should do so.

Nominally on the defensive, Frémont and his counsel were actually able much of the time to take the offensive against Kearny. They accused him, quite unjustly, of entering California to steal the laurels and the material benefits which Stockton and Frémont had won by their forced marches, dangerous skirmishes, and constant hardships. They implied that the old-line officers were unjustly jealous of the exploits of the young outsider. They emphasized the fact that the brass cannon which Kearny had lost in the defeat of San Pasqual had been recaptured by Frémont, and hinted that Kearny (who never reported its recovery to the government) felt humiliated and jealous on this score. They declared that Kearny's deliberate intent had been to ruin Frémont; that with this purpose he had refused to give Frémont notice of his impending arrest; that he had forced upon the Lieutenant-Colonel the necessity of choosing between a surprise trial, or allowing ruinous charges, supported by a defamatory press campaign, to hang over his head. These statements had enough truth to give them effectiveness. Finally, they said, Kearny had taken pains to detain Frémont's friend Gillespie in California, with the evident hope of crippling his side of the case; but fortunately Gillespie had extricated himself and reached Washington.

In fine, it was an exceedingly bitter court-martial. When the day came—January 24, 1848—for Frémont to sum up his defense, the room was crowded with army officers, Congressmen,

and fashionable ladies. Before this distinguished audience, Frémont flung accusations of perjury and false testimony in Kearny's face. His arguments, said the reporters, made a strong impression.¹⁶ They would have been still stronger had they been more moderate in tone, and had he avoided unnecessary imputations upon the acts of the brave and effective soldier who confronted him; but he closed his plea well:

If it was a crime in me to accept the governorship from Commodore Stockton, it was a crime in him to have bestowed it; and in either event, crime or not, the government which knew of his intention to appoint me, and did not forbid it, has lost the right of prosecuting either of us.

My acts in California have all been with high motives and a desire for the public service. My scientific labors did something to open California to the knowledge of my countrymen; its geography had been a sealed book. My military operations were conquests without bloodshed; my civil administration was for the public good. I offer California, during my administration, for comparison with the most tranquil portions of the United States; I offer it in contrast to the condition of New Mexico at the same time. I prevented civil war against Governor Stockton, by refusing to join General Kearny against him; I arrested civil war against myself, by consenting to be deposed....

I have been brought as a prisoner and a criminal from that country. I could return to it, after this trial is over, without rank or guards, and without molestation from the people, except to be importuned for the money which the government owes them.

I am now ready to receive the sentence of the court.

This was more dignified than Benton's conduct in the closing days of the trial. He conceived the idea that Kearny had looked "insultingly and fiendishly" at Frémont, and that it was therefore his duty, when Kearny took the stand, to glare at him in an angry, intimidatory way. The result was an explosion by Kearny, a direct clash between the General and Senator, and an angry scene in which the latter, boasting that he had out-

¹⁶ New York *Herald*, January 27, 1848.

stared Kearny "till his eyes fell—till they fell upon the floor!" was rebuked by the presiding officer.

After three days of deliberation, the court on January 31, 1848, found Frémont guilty on all three charges, and sentenced him to dismissal from the service. Six of the thirteen members recommended him to the clemency of President Polk, mentioning the peculiar circumstances of the case, and the distinguished professional services rendered by the defendant. The verdict thereupon went to the Cabinet, which devoted the greater part of two meetings to its consideration. All the members agreed that Frémont had been guilty of disobedience, but most of them doubted whether he had committed mutiny, and they were unanimous that so valuable an officer ought not to be dismissed. In the end, Secretary of State Buchanan and Attorney-General Nathan Clifford advised that Polk disapprove the sentence as being too severe, while Secretary of War Marcy, Secretary of the Navy Mason, and Postmaster-General Cave Johnson urged him to approve it and then remit the penalty.¹⁷ Polk decided to follow the latter course, and made formal announcement that, believing Frémont to be innocent of mutiny but guilty on the other two charges, he approved the sentence of the court-martial, but canceled the punishment. "Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont," he ordered, "will accordingly be released from arrest, will resume his sword, and report for duty."

The President might have smiled sardonically as he published his determination. It was upon the insistence of Benton that Kearny's original charge of mutiny against Frémont, which Polk found unwarranted, had been broadened into a court-martial on the other two charges as well, which he pronounced warranted. Benton's temper had led him into a serious tactical blunder.

Although the President's decision was softened by a reference to "the previous meritorious and valuable services of Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont," it was too much for the high-

¹⁷ Polk, *Diary*, III, pp. 335-340.

spirited explorer to endure. Probably he needed no advice from the angry Benton to shape his course. Instantly he presented his resignation, declaring that he was innocent and could not, by accepting Polk's clemency, admit the justice of the verdict. A month later, on March 15th, 1848, Polk accepted the resignation. Frémont was thus, at the age of thirty-four, released to civil life. An unfortunate and totally unnecessary episode had been closed.

Technically, the verdict of the court-martial was just; but from a broader point of view it was excessively severe, and President Polk would have done well to accept the counsel of Buchanan and Clifford, and refuse it his endorsement. The real fault attached to the Administration itself for issuing such conflicting orders that Stockton and Kearny naturally disagreed as to their authority. Kearny was morally, if not technically, censurable for concealing from Frémont the directions from Washington which decisively ended this conflict. His attitude had been bullying and harsh, and even so severe a critic of Frémont as Royce admits that the younger man appears in much the better light. However rash the explorer had been at first and however quarrelsome later, a reprimand would have been an adequate punishment. When blame should have been apportioned among all the chief actors, it was unfair to concentrate it upon a devoted and energetic officer whose chief offense was that he had not been able to decide which of two quarreling superiors was in the wrong.

That the public took this view is evident from the fact that the verdict did Frémont not a whit of harm. The press gave it scanty space, for every one was tired of the affair; one journal remarked that the trial had taken longer than Scott's siege of Vera Cruz. The general opinion in Washington had been that the explorer ought to be cleared. When the verdict was handed down, many declared that it showed the usual jealousy of veteran army men for a brilliant young newcomer. This was the view of Bennett's *Herald*, which remarked that "during the progress of the assizes we saw, from time to time, evidences of

hostility on the part of members of the court against Lieutenant-Colonel Frémont, who held a higher commission, and was a greater, though a younger man, than a majority of his triers; and what we then suspected, has this afternoon been presented to us as actual truth."¹⁸ But even the Washington newspapers evinced little interest. The talk of the day was upon the rivalry of Harry Clay and Zachary Taylor for the Whig nomination, the sudden death of John Quincy Adams, the Wilmot Proviso, and the details of the treaty with Mexico. Frémont's condemnation thus passed almost unnoticed, after weeks during which his defense and the story of his California exploits had been blazoned the nation over.

He actually gained in reputation by the trial. In one sense it was no misfortune to be taken from the Army, where his rashness and dislike of restraint would have kept him chafing, but in another he was a heavy loser, for his resignation broke off abruptly his career as explorer in the service of the Topographical Corps. The whole outlook before him seemed changed. He took the termination of his military ambitions bitterly to heart, and Jessie's sorrow was even keener. But the resentment of neither approached that of the irascible Benton. Polk wrote later:¹⁹

There is every indication now that he [Benton] will join the Whigs in the support of General Taylor, at all events until he can get offices for his three sons-in-law. If I had failed to do my duty in Col. Frémont's case, and given an office which he sought for his Whig son-in-law [Jones], he would never have quarreled with me. His course toward me and my administration for more than a year past has been selfish and wholly unprincipled.

Benton indeed lost few opportunities to show his enmity for Polk. He introduced a bill to reform the procedure of courts-martial; he opposed the Administration on the treaty with

¹⁸ New York *Herald*, January 31, February 21, 1848. H. H. Bancroft writes (*History of California*, V, p. 457) of the explorer's adherents: "And it cannot be denied that they won a victory; that the verdict of popular sympathy was in Frémont's favor."

¹⁹ *Diary*, IV, p. 330.

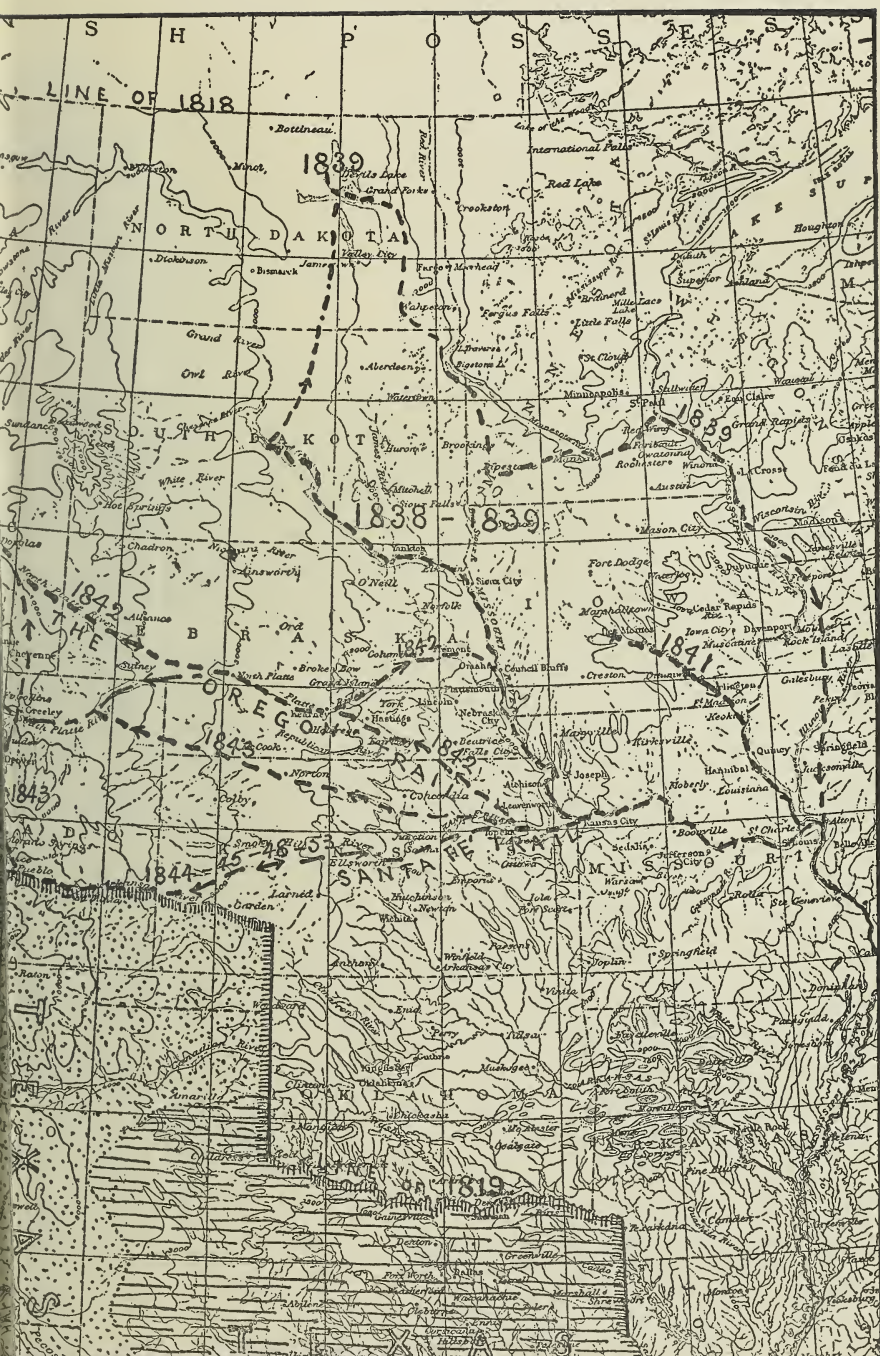
Mexico; he ceased to call at the White House, and for more than a twelvemonth had no intercourse whatever with the President; and he talked of publishing a letter of Polk's which would injure the Administration. When in August, 1848, Polk nominated Kearny to a brevet-major-generalship, Benton declared that he would filibuster till the end of the session to defeat the appointment. He harangued the Senate for thirteen days, in a genuinely effective philippic against Kearny combined with laudation of Frémont; but in the end the nomination was confirmed.²⁰

Kearny died this same year in St. Louis. On his deathbed, he sent word to Jessie, who was in the city, that he would be grateful for a visit, but she sternly refused the proffered reconciliation. Her second baby and first son, Benton, who was born in July, had then just died from an affection of the heart which she always believed was caused by the anxieties she underwent during the trial; and she said that between her and Kearny there was a little grave that she could not forget.²¹

Yet the two names have been strangely linked in our geography. In more than one state, like Nebraska, a town or county named Frémont stands in near proximity to a town or county named Kearny; in more than one city, like San Francisco, Frémont Street and Kearny Street lie close together. When the United States entered the First World War, two National Guard camps were established on the Pacific Coast; one, in southern California, Camp Kearny, and the other, in northern California, Camp Frémont.

²⁰ E. I. McCormac, *James K. Polk*, p. 476ff.

²¹ Jessie Benton Frémont MSS, Bancroft Library.



FREMONT'S EXPLORATIONS, 1838-1853

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